



ROGER THE BOLD

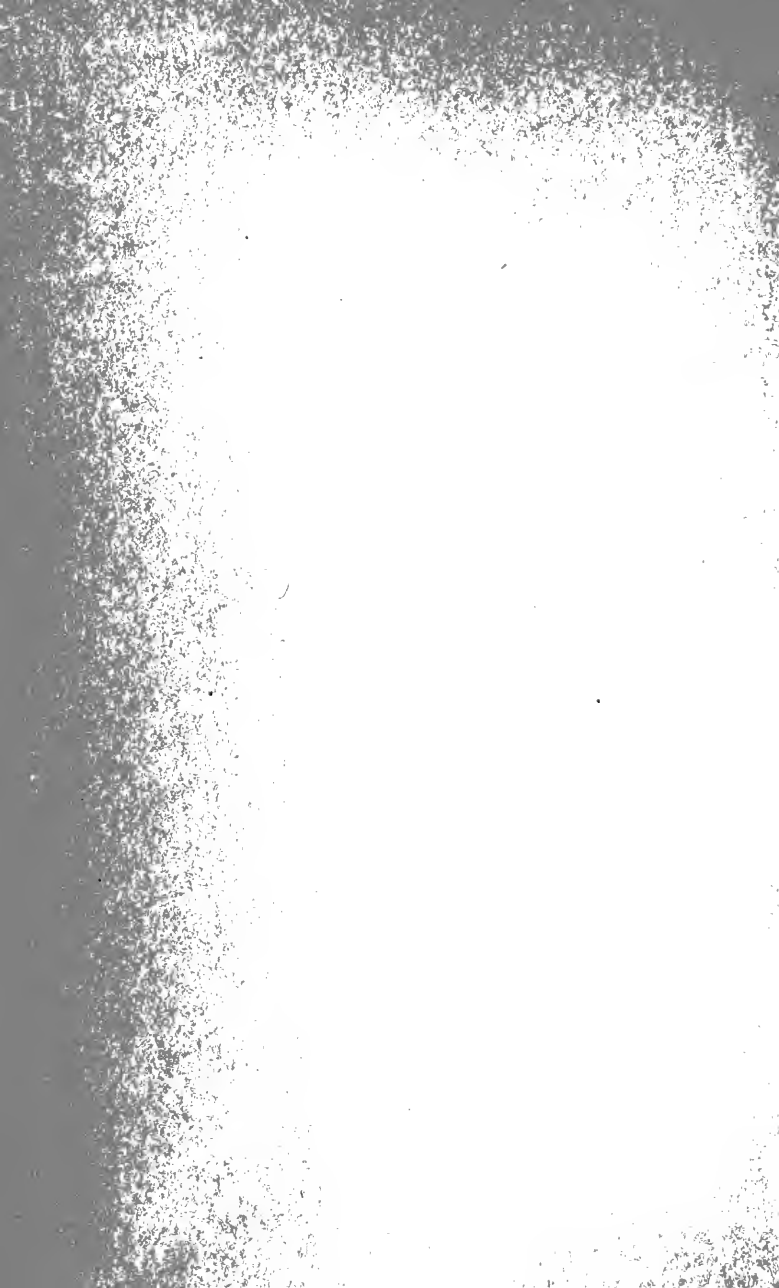
A TALE OF
THE CONQUEST
OF MEXICO

BY
LT. COL. F. S. BRERETON



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ROGER THE BOLD

By LT.-COLONEL BRERETON

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"HE LEAPED UPON THE TOP OF THE BARRICADE"

ROGER THE BOLD

*A TALE OF
THE CONQUEST OF MEXICO*

BY
LT.-COLONEL F. S. BRERETON

Author of
"The Dragon of Pekin" "Tom Stapleton, the Boy Scout" &c.

ILLUSTRATED BY STANLEY L. WOOD

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CONTENTS

| CHAP. | | Page |
|--------|---|------|
| I. | THE IMAGE OF THE SUN | 9 |
| II. | OFF TO THE TERRA FIRMA | 24 |
| III. | ROGER THE LIEUTENANT | 41 |
| IV. | THE ISLAND OF CUBA | 61 |
| V. | A VALUABLE CAPTURE | 80 |
| VI. | A STRANGER COMES ABOARD | 102 |
| VII. | THE HAND OF THE TRAITOR | 121 |
| VIII. | A CITY BY THE WATER | 139 |
| IX. | LED TO THE SACRIFICE | 160 |
| X. | ROGER AT BAY | 179 |
| XI. | NEWS OF FERNANDO CORTES | 199 |
| XII. | THE SPANIARDS LAY AN AMBUSH | 218 |
| XIII. | A SENTENCE OF DEATH | 237 |
| XIV. | ROGER IS TRUE TO HIS COMRADES | 257 |
| XV. | BACK TO MEXICO | 274 |
| XVI. | THE FIRST ENCOUNTER | 294 |
| XVII. | A FLEET OF BRIGANTINES | 313 |
| XVIII. | THE DEFENCE OF THE CAUSEWAYS | 330 |
| XIX. | ALVAREZ PROBES THE SECRET | 347 |
| XX. | A RACE FOR THE OCEAN | 367 |

ILLUSTRATIONS

| | Facing Page |
|--|---------------------|
| HE LEAPED UPON THE TOP OF THE BARRICADE | <i>Frontispiece</i> |
| THE GOLDEN DISK | 18 |
| ROGER SENT HIM ROLLING INTO THE UNDERWOOD . . . | 88 |
| THE BLADE FELL TRUE ON THE SOLDIER'S HEAD, DROPPING HIM LIKE A STONE | 232 |
| THE REMAINDER WERE QUICKLY IN FULL FLIGHT . . . | 288 |
| THE SPANIARD WAS STAGGERED | 368 |
| <hr/> | |
| Map of Part of Mexico | <i>in page</i> 146 |
| Map showing Mexico City and Surroundings . . . | <i>in page</i> 169 |

ROGER THE BOLD

CHAPTER I

The Image of the Sun

“**H**I! Hi! Hi! Your attention, if it please you. Gentles and people, I pray you lend your assistance to one who is in need of help, but who seeks not for alms. But little is asked of you, and that can be done in the space of a minute or more. 'Tis but to decipher a letter attached to this plaque. 'Tis written in some foreign tongue—in Spanish, I should venture. A silver groat is offered to the one who will translate.”

The speaker, a short, large-nosed man of middle age, had taken his stand upon an upturned barrel, for otherwise he would have been hidden amongst the people who thronged that part of the city of London, and would have found it impossible to attract their attention. But as it was, his head and shoulders reared themselves above the crowd, and he stood there the observed of all observers. He was dressed in a manner which suggested a calling partly attached to the sea and partly to do with the profession of arms, and if there had been any doubt in the minds of those who watched him, and listened to his harangue, his language, which was

Roger the Bold

plentifully mingled with coarse nautical expressions of that day, and his weather-beaten and rugged features, would have assured them at once that he at least looked to ships and to the sea for his living. Peter Tamworth was indeed a sailor, every inch of him, but he had been schooled to other things, and had learned to use arms at times and in places where failure to protect himself would have led to dire consequences.

He was a merry fellow, too, for he laughed and joked with the crowd, his eyes rolling in a peculiar manner all his own. His nose was large, huge in fact, and of a colour which seemed to betoken a fondness for carousal when opportunity occurred. A stubbly beard grew at his chin, while the upper lip was clean shaven, or had been on the previous Sunday, it being Peter's custom to indulge in a visit to the barber on that day if it happened that he was in port. A pair of massive shoulders, into which the neck seemed to be far sunk, completed an appearance, so far as it could be seen, which seemed to denote a stout fellow, fond of the good things to be found in this world, and not lacking in courage and determination when the time for blows arrived. A little later, when he leaped from the barrel and appeared in the open, it was seen that a ragged pair of hose covered massive legs, which were unusually bowed, and should have belonged to a horseman rather than to one who followed the calling of the sea.

"Come, my masters," he called out again, holding the plaque above his head, and drumming upon it with the handle of his dagger till it rang clearly and sweetly like a silver gong. "Here is the Image of

The Image of the Sun

the Sun, and in gold! Yes, gentles and people, I commend this plaque to your careful attention. 'Tis solid gold—the gold of the Indies, the gold with which our Spanish cousins get rich and fatten.”

The words were sufficient to call the crowd hovering in that neighbourhood more closely about him. They came running from the entrance to London Bridge, where many had been lolling, enjoying the sunshine, and watching the loading of the ships which lay on the mud below. They came, too, from the city, along old Watling Street, or from Lombard Street, from beneath the shadow of St. Paul's, then a fine building which dominated the city of London. For no fire had then occurred to destroy it, and no monument stood at the opening of the bridge to tell future Londoners of the danger that had once threatened their capital. Indeed, though the streets about were narrow, there were wide spaces here and there, and trees and green fields were very close at hand. Country people could be seen in the markets not far away, while the pavements supported a mixture of peaceful folk, of men at arms, or friars in their robes, and of seamen from the adjacent river. A negro could occasionally be seen, for Portugal had imported many to her shores years before, and some had drifted to England, or were employed on the ships. Whoever they were, whatever their calling, the tale of gold from the Indies brought them running to the spot where stood Peter Tamworth.

“Gold from the Spanish possessions across the sea,” said one city merchant to his friend as they listened. “They say that Ferdinand of Spain rolls in riches, that his chairs are of gold, and that his

Roger the Bold

clothing is heavy with pearls and other jewels. And this fellow, this rascal, tells us that he has some of the spoil. 'Tis not so easily gathered. These Spaniards jealously guard their discovery, for, were it otherwise, there are many who would take ship and try their own fortune at discovery."

"Many in high places, too," responded his friend, a wizened little man, who seemed to take the mention of so much gold as a personal affront. "Riches, indeed, have these Spaniards, and it would be right and proper if they could be divided."

"Between ourselves, friend, no doubt," laughed the other. "That is a course to which I give the warmest approval. And 'tis said that even the king's majesty would stoop to a portion, for his coffers are reported low."

"And he bears but little love for Ferdinand and Spain. 'Tis whispered"—he took his comrade by the sleeve and pulled him closer, so as to speak into his ear—" 'tis whispered, and with some truth, by all accounts, that his Majesty would fain divorce his queen from Aragon, and take Anne Boleyn in her place. No doubt, if he would do that, he would also agree to a division of the Indies. But listen to the rascal. He pretends that the plaque is gold. Way there for his worship, the most worthy governor of the honourable company of spectacle-makers."

The pompous little fellow prodded those in front, and urged them to one side, his comrade, a big, genial-looking man, following with a polite bow, and muttered thanks as the people gave way; for the London companies were then at the summit of their power, and a governor was a personage to be reckoned with.

The Image of the Sun

“Gold, I say! Solid gold of more than eighteen carats!” shouted Peter, unabashed by the presence of such a crowd. “An image of the sun, beautifully engraved, as all may see who care to approach, and bearing a plan, as it seems to me, on the reverse. There, gentles and his worship the governor, come closer and look. Here are roads carved upon the face of the plaque, roads and houses, and a space all round, no doubt meant for open country.”

“Or the sea, my fine fellow,” said the governor, whose prominent position in London had given him easy passage to the very foot of the barrel. “Look for yourself. Here are rocks, and, as I live, these must be boats.”

His observation caused his friend to peer even more closely at the image which Peter held. He dragged a pair of spectacles from an inner pocket, and, donning them, stared at the inscription.

“They are boats,” he said at length, “and this is the sea—or, rather, an inland lake. Moreover, I believe that the rascal tells the truth. The plaque is of gold.”

“Then it must be worth a hundred pounds, more or less. There are some who would give that for it, as a relic from the Indies—if, indeed, it comes from that part.”

“While there are others, my masters, who would not part with it for more than ten times that amount. 'Tis gold, of a surety,” went on Peter. “Solid gold; and it keeps a golden secret. It tells of a place in the Indies where are gems and riches. This tablet attached may give the locality, and a ship with brave hearts aboard her might even hit upon the spot.”

“But you cannot think of that! My friend, the

Roger the Bold

cost of equipping a ship would be greater than the value of this plaque," exclaimed the governor.

"I could not, worshipful sir; and I do not say that there are those who contemplate it. Much will fall upon the translation of the writing. A silver groat is offered to the one who will give us help."

"A silver groat! You are safe in offering the sum," laughed the governor, "for I warrant that there are not two who speak that foreign tongue, unless it be the ambassador from Spain. Go, then, to him, rascal, and learn what he has to say. Mayhap he will give the meaning of the writing on the parchment attached."

"Mayhap he would do even more, your worship, an it please you," answered Peter, with a cunning smile, placing a finger against his enormous nose. "Mayhap he would find a place for Peter Tamworth in the stocks, and hold the plaque for himself, in the name of the King of Spain. Oh yes, worshipful sir, it would be wise to go to the ambassador!"

There was a roar of laughter, in which all within hearing joined; for even in those days, before the advent of Drake and his comrades, a Spanish treasure ship was a fair mark for any British vessel, a proper cargo to prey upon. The wealth of the Indies had indeed been heard of, and the fame of the possessions—Hispaniola and Cuba held by the Crown of Spain—had spread far and wide. What wonder if the news of gold and gems attracted every one! In Spain itself, thousands were eager to venture their all in new voyages of discovery, and very many sailed annually from her shores, hoping to make their fortunes. But to foreigners the new possessions were forbidden; and so far no

The Image of the Sun

Englishman had dared to venture to the Spanish main. Perhaps for that very reason they hailed with all the more delight the news of a captured Spaniard, and listened to tales of the wealth aboard with wide-open eyes, while their cupidity was aroused. Here was another tale, and before their faces was dangled a large plaque, full ten inches across, which had come from the Indies. No wonder that they were attracted, and stared at Peter with unwonted interest.

"The stocks would be a friendly place to find yourself in," suddenly said a man, who hitherto had stood silently looking at the plaque. "Perhaps, were the ambassador from the court of Ferdinand to see this gold, and learn from whence it came, a rope would encircle your neck, friend of the big nose."

Peter Tamworth started and changed colour. He looked closely at the stranger, and was on the point of answering flippantly, when something caused him to hold his tongue and doff his ragged cap. For the one who had spoken bore an air of authority, and, moreover, was dressed in the height of the fashion. Indeed, he had only just then alighted from a gilded chair borne between two horses, for he had been passing across the bridge and had been attracted by the gathering. That he was, in fact, a person of no ordinary consequence was plainly evident, for the worshipful governor no sooner set eyes upon him than he dropped on one knee.

"My lord," he said, "the rascal jests only, and no doubt he is well able to account to any one for the possession of the plaque. But see it for yourself, sir. It is of vast interest, and from the little that I

Roger the Bold

know I should judge has indeed come from the Indies. Back there, good people! Do not press closely upon his noble lordship."

There was a stir in the crowd and, obedient to the request, they fell back a little, for the nobleman who had so suddenly appeared was well known to all. Indeed, he held a high place at the court of his Majesty, King Henry the Eighth, the reigning monarch. Very soon he was left in a clear space, so that one could inspect him. He was tall and very fair, and, as has been said, dressed in the finest clothing. But for all that, dandy though he undoubtedly was, he bore a martial air, which was increased by his manner of carrying his sword. He was calm, too, with the coolness of one who is used to being the centre of large throngs.

"A golden plaque from the Indies," he said, as he took the Image of the Sun from Peter and rang it with his knuckle. "And I see on one side a finely graven image which surely represents the sun. On the reverse there is sketched a plan of some buildings."

"Which appear to be built on bridges, with viaducts running from them, and water all round, may it please your lordship," interposed the governor.

"And boats upon the water," added the stranger. "In fact, a city like this London, only built in still water instead of beside a river. And surely there is something stranger still at this point."

He placed his finger almost in the centre of the picture graven on the gold plaque, and held it there while he fumbled in his dress. Then he drew out a glass, set in a fine gold frame, and held it above the engraving.

The Image of the Sun

"Birds and beasts," he said solemnly. "Then the people who dwell in this strange part keep animals for their pleasure, showing that they must be civilized to some degree. Come, rascal, what tale have you to tell in connection with this relic? Have no fear, for though I am the Earl of Essex, and have the king's ear, I am not the one to take spoil from an honest sailor."

He stood holding the plaque and inspecting it with increasing interest while Peter changed from one leg to the other, blowing hot and cold, and wearing a comical look of perplexity not unmingled with fear.

"Your answer?" demanded the earl. "And have no fear. Have I not said that I will harm you in no way? Nor will I allow any one to take this plaque from you."

"'Tis not that, noble sir," answered Peter at last, summoning courage to speak, and doffing his cap again with becoming deference. "But there are ears within hearing, and tongues wag in this city no doubt as fast as they do elsewhere. May it please you to come closer that I may speak?"

The earl at once stepped to the foot of the barrel, motioning the governor and his friend to do the same.

"They shall also listen, if you will permit, my good fellow. For they are interested, and can be trusted to keep the secret. Now, the tale."

"'Tis short, and soon told, your lordship. I have but just returned upon a galleon plying between this port and that of the northern isles. We went by the west coast route, and made our ports in the north without adventure. But on the return, when entering the channel, we fell in with a Frenchman

Roger the Bold

—a galleon which sought to capture us. We endeavoured to sail away, for when you are ready to fight, it is sometimes well to pretend that you desire to escape. So we crowded canvas upon our yards, while the master so manœuvred our craft that we made but little way. Meanwhile we made ready for the encounter. Soon the Frenchman bore down upon us, and sought to take us by the board. But we had the wind, and luffing as she came, we raked her decks with shot from our small cannon. Then we closed with her, and lashed our rails to hers."

"A fine manœuvre. Now, with what result?"

"They thought to take us easily, your lordship. But we were upon their decks and had cut them down while they were still amazed at the turn of affairs. Then we set to work to search her cargo, finding a few fine vessels of gold and some feathered clothing which I have never seen before. It was in the form of cloaks, and all were stitched with pearls and glittering stones. In all there was no great amount, so that when divided there was left this plaque alone to my share."

"But how, then, do you argue that it is from the Indies?" demanded the earl. "I grant that it would appear to have come from some such foreign part. But you took it from a Frenchman—a legitimate act, seeing that the king's Majesty is now at war with France, and that this French ship was the aggressor."

"The tale was told us by one of the prisoners," answered Peter, recovering his jovial spirits, now that he learned that there was no trouble to be feared.

"And he said? Come, hurry, my good fellow; I am in haste to be gone."

The Image of the Sun

"That he, with a comrade, had fallen in with a Spanish ship and had sacked her. She contained little compared with others of which the tales have reached us; but what there was was destined for the King of Spain. He said that it was a token sent by some of the king's lieutenants, to show their Royal master what riches there were in the new countries to which their good fortune had taken them."

"And a right wealthy country it must be where maps are drawn upon gold plaques of such a thickness. What do you value the relic at, my good fellow? If not at too vast a sum I will buy it of you."

The earl turned the plaque over and over in his hands, looking at it with vast interest, while Peter stared at him in perplexity. For the offer of money was an alluring bait to this penurious sailor, who seldom had more than a few pence to jingle in his pocket. But the tale of the Indies had aroused his cupidity. He had dreamed of gold and gems, and of a huge fortune easily made since he had become the possessor of the plaque, and it was the thought of some greater wealth in the future which caused him to decline the earl's offer.

"I ask pardon for refusing to sell," he said humbly. "But we have not learned the meaning of the words which are written on the parchment. It may mean that a clue will be given to more gold, more of those feathered and jewelled cloaks which we found aboard the Frenchman."

"Then we must search for a Spaniard, though 'twill be hard to find one in this country at this time,

Roger the Bold

save and except the ambassador, who, I fear, bears us no great good will."

The earl took one last look at the golden disk, and was about to turn away, when there was an interruption. Cries were heard from the crowd, who stood staring at Peter and the gentlemen speaking with him, while a crossbow man could be seen pushing his way toward the barrel. He was a huge fellow, standing some six feet four, and his height was increased by the iron cap which was perched upon his head. More than that, as he drew nearer it was seen that he was merely a youth—a youth of unusual size and weight, upon whose jerkin were displayed the familiar arms of the house of Essex. Fresh-complexioned, and with dark-brown hair, this youthful crossbow man was a handsome fellow, and carried his many inches well. But as he neared the earl he halted, took his bow from his shoulder, and knelt on one knee.

"The tale came to me that an interpreter in the language of Spain was required, your grace," he said. "I pushed through the crowd to hear more of what was wanted, and see if I could be of service, for it happens that I was born in Spain, and speak the tongue as well as my own."

"And perhaps the silver groat was an attraction, my lad. Come, now, I see you bear my arms, and are therefore in my service. Your name and age, and how comes it that one born in Spain is of such a height?"

"I am English born, your grace," was the answer, as the young fellow drew himself proudly to his full height. "There is no trace of Spanish blood in me, for my father and mother are both of this country.

The Image of the Sun

My name is Roger de Luce, and I have been tall since I was ten years of age. I am now just eighteen, if it please you."

"A fine-grown lad, who has done well with English feeding. And son, I have little doubt, to my tried and trusted Raven de Luce, captain of the crossbow men. How come you to speak this Spanish tongue?"

The earl looked closely at the tall young fellow, noticing his frank and open features, his unconscious air of determination and breeding, and the stalwart frame, which belonged to a man of thirty rather than to a youth of eighteen. Big men were not so often to be met with in those days, when London harboured only some two hundred thousand, and the earl secretly congratulated himself upon having such a champion in his ranks.

"Come," he said, "you are no commoner; that I can see with half an eye. Besides, I know your father to be fit for higher things than captain of one of my bands. How did you acquire the language?"

"I was born in Spain, your grace, when my father went in the suite of your uncle to the court of Ferdinand. My mother accompanied him, and we were there, but for a visit home on two occasions, for eight years in all. There I learned to speak the tongue as well as our own, and I have since kept it up with my father, for he thinks that the time may come when it may be of service to me."

"And to others, thereby winning you reward. Let us hear you translate, and perhaps this worthy fellow here will let us see his silver groat."

"Willingly. Here it is, Roger, and I may as well tell you now something of the reason for asking this

Roger the Bold

service of you. Here is a golden plaque, sent to his Majesty of Spain, so it is said, from his lieutenants, who are bent on discovery in the Indies. 'Twas captured from a Spanish galleon by a Frenchman, whom we in turn despoiled. Here is the parchment attached, and here the silver groat in payment of your services."

All crowded about the tall youth now and listened intently, the earl showing as much enthusiasm and eagerness as any one. Roger took the plaque and spread out the roll of parchment attached.

"It was written a year ago," he said, "and this is the translation: 'To his most Catholic Majesty, King of Spain and of all the Spanish possessions beyond the sea. The plaque forms part of an offering which we, your lieutenants in the Indies, humbly send you, praying for your acceptance. We are about to set out for this city of which report has reached us. It lies on the Terra Firma to the due west of Cuba, and somewhat south after making the northern cape of Yucatan. We have it from the natives that the city is called Mexico, and surpasses anything ever dreamed of in magnificence and wealth. The peoples who inhabit it and the cities lying about the lake engraved on the plaque, have abundance of gold and stones, and their store of treasure is held in the city of Mexico, in that portion beyond the central square where the animals are shown. But the part is not named, for these Indians do not read nor write. They describe all that is seen or that happens by means of pictures and engravings. But the treasure lies within a small radius, and shall be ours. We go to conquer for

The Image of the Sun

your sacred Majesty, to colonize, and to bring the holy Catholic faith to these heathen.—FERNANDO CORTES.’”

“The last?” suddenly exclaimed the earl. “Whose was the signature?”

“Fernando Cortes, governor of the Terra Firma.”

“Then there is truth in this plaque,” said the earl, showing some trace of excitement. “I have heard of this valiant Fernando Cortes. He finds new lands and new treasures for his king every year, it seems. Good fellow, this plaque would interest his most noble Majesty. Trust it to my charge, and I will give you a sealed receipt for it. Or better, come with the relic to Greenwich to-morrow at noon, and bring the plaque with you. You shall have audience of the king, and this Roger, who has done us this service, shall be there, too, to meet you and translate. Such tales as these, when truth is obviously behind them, must be borne to the king’s ears, for it is well that he should hear of these far-off lands, for mayhap he would care to have a finger in the pie which the King of Spain is picking. To-morrow, then, at noon, at the door of the palace at Greenwich.”

He beckoned to Roger to follow him, and at once turned to leave, the young crossbow man elbowing a way for him through the crowd to his chair or coach. A minute later the earl had entered, and the horses were in motion, two men being at their heads. Roger fell in behind, his mind full of the Indies and of the visit planned for the morrow.

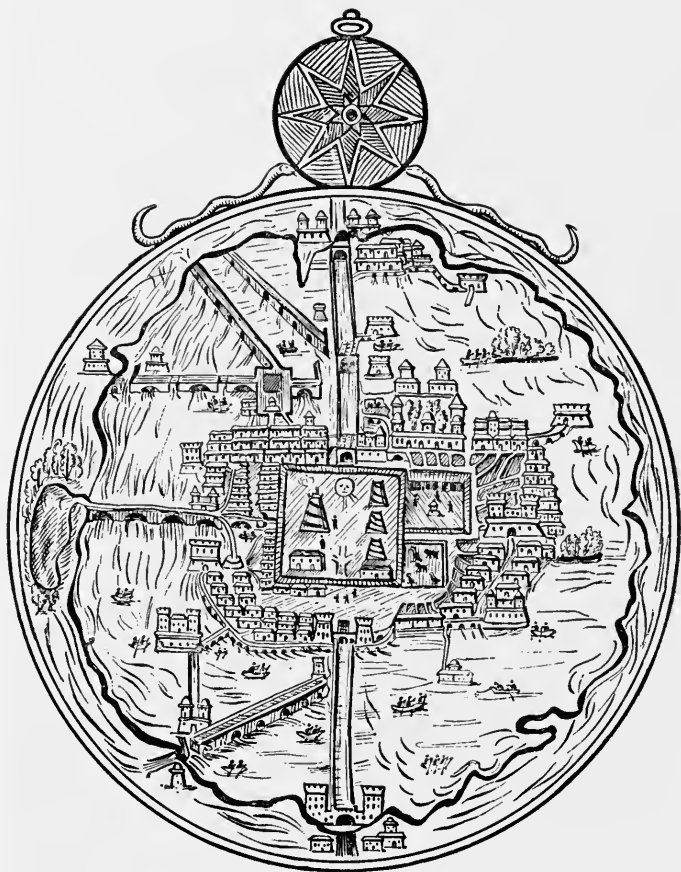
CHAPTER II

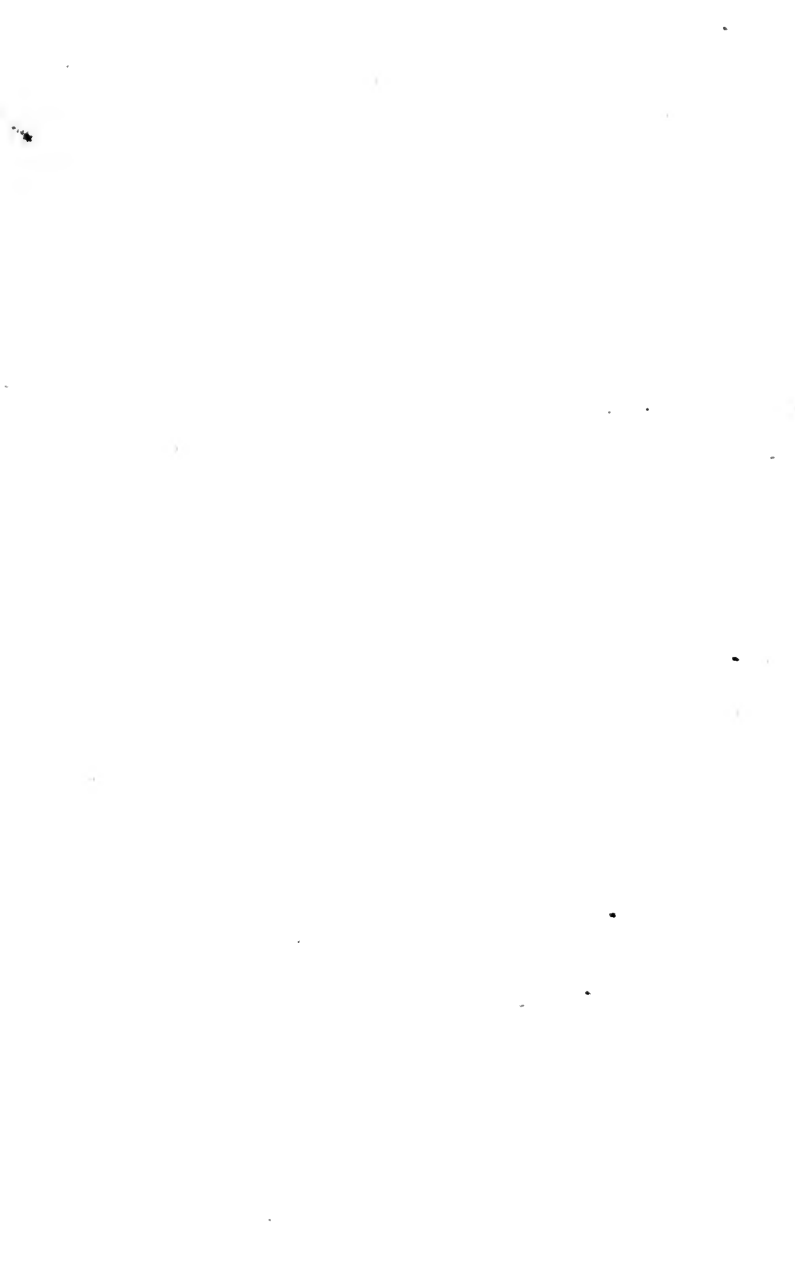
Off to the Terra Firma

A PROUD day it was for those who, at the order of the earl, attended at the door of Greenwich Palace, and great was the emotion of Peter Tamworth. He appeared in the most brilliant raiment, borrowed, if the truth had but been known, from an accommodating dealer, and looking on this bright morning more weather-beaten than before—his squat figure and his huge nose calling unwonted attention to him. Roger de Luce joined him as the hour for the interview arrived, looking taller than ever, and more substantial. He, too, had donned his best apparel, and still carried his crossbow.

“This way. Follow, an it please you,” said an attendant, suddenly opening the gate, to the alarm of Peter, who was more than excited at the thought of the meeting. “Rub your shoes against the broom, and enter quietly. His grace awaits you within, and will take you to the king. Remember to kneel to his Majesty.”

He led the way through a long corridor till he came to a large chamber hung with tapestry, and with an arched exit leading into the interior of the palace; and here the Earl of Essex met them.





Off to the Terra Firma

"You have the plaque?" he demanded shortly. "Then, keep it covered till the king's Majesty makes application for it. Now follow."

He went through the archway, Roger and Peter coming close on his heels, the former cool and unruffled, while Peter grew hot with uneasiness; for he had fears lest this attack upon the Frenchman should lead to trouble, and lest King Henry the Eighth, whose reputation was well known, should take a fancy to the plaque and insist on keeping it. However, they had little cause to be nervous, for King Hal on this fine morning was in the best of humour.

"Show this relic, rascal," he said, as he stood beside the earl in a window niche, "and relate how it came into your hands, leaving nothing of the incidents of the fight to be imagined. By my faith, Essex, 'tis a giant you have here, this crossbow man—or youth, I should have said. How old is the lad?"

He directed his last question at Roger, who fell on his knee, and answered.

"Eighteen! Then England need have little fear while she continues to possess such sons. A fine body-servant, Essex."

"And an interpreter, sire. He and his father were in service with our mission at the Court of Spain some years ago."

For an instant a cloud swept across the brow of the king, for at this time he still remembered the opposition he had met with regard to his cherished wish for a separation from his queen, Catharine of Aragon. Then he stretched out a hand, and took the plaque from Peter.

Roger the Bold

"A sea dog," he said, in his blunt, loud tones, staring at the sailor, while the latter quaked; "a sea dog who has fought and won, and fought and lost many a time. Is it not so?"

"And who hopes to fight again, an it please your Majesty. There is news here which would give fighting to many a man of yours, and some wealth besides. The Indies are filled with pearls and gold."

"And you would have me take them from my brother of Spain?"

There was a half-smile on the lips of the king as he spoke, and thus encouraged, Peter, who had now lost some little of his nervousness, related all that he knew, and told how the plaque had come to his hands.

"I once fell in with a Spaniard who had served in the Indies," he added. "He had been driven from Spain because of some offence to the Church, and therefore he did not hesitate to tell me what he had seen. There are thousands of undiscovered leagues yet, and it may be that some few might come to the hands of the mighty king of England. There are men on the sea who could do for you what these others have done and are now doing for Ferdinand of Spain, if only the permission were given them, and the money with which to purchase ships and stores at their hand."

"The rascal tempts me to become an adventurer," laughed the king, looking closely at the plaque. "But let us hear about this engraving of the sun. 'Tis marvellously wrought, and like you, Essex, I see buildings, roads, and beasts, and boats upon the water. Let the interpreter tell us of the writing."

Off to the Terra Firma

With a nod Roger was beckoned forward, and at once translated, his fluency delighting the king.

"Truly a valuable man to send on such an expedition," he whispered to the earl, "for he speaks the Spanish tongue like a native, and he is stalwart and strong. This tale of foreign lands tempts me, for I aspire to extend my dominions. Let this sailor have the plaque and retire with the youth. We will speak quietly together."

What happened at that interview it would be impossible to state. But the result was soon felt by Peter Tamworth, and by Roger de Luce; for hardly had a week passed, and the memory of their interview with the king was still fresh to them, and much in their minds, when a stranger presented himself to each in succession. He was a knight in poor circumstances, by name Sir Thomas Brice, and he came armed with authority to speak.

"There is a large brigantine lying in the river," he said, "and I am in want of men to man her. Her mission is a secret one, at which you can guess. She is bound for the Indies. At this moment all manner of stores are being loaded aboard her, together with guns and weapons. Will you come with me and form part of my crew?"

Sir Thomas, a tall and courageous-looking man, who had already won a reputation in the wars with France, waited to see what effect his message had, and then commenced to speak again.

"There is no need to decide at once," he said quietly. "Meet me to-night at the Swan Tavern, in Cheapside, and there we will discuss the matter. For you, Roger de Luce, I have the Earl of Essex's sanction for your absence, and his wishes for you

Roger the Bold

to form one of the exploration. We go to discover this city which was engraved on the plaque, and also to see whether we cannot oust these Spaniards."

Acknowledging Roger's salutation he strode away again, leaving the latter to think the question over, and discuss it with his father.

"'Tis a chance which may not occur again," said the latter, though Roger needed no encouragement, for he was eager to go. "There is a plan, which should take you to this part, and maybe you will arrive there before this Spaniard who is known as Fernando Cortes. Then there will be riches for all, and you will win back for our family the position which it once held. For we were not always servants, or soldiers in subordinate positions. Time was when the de Luces held their lands and vassals, and jested with the best."

That night Roger kept the appointment at the Swan Tavern, a famous hostelry, where he met Sir Thomas, with whom was Peter Tamworth and some ten others.

"We sail within the week," said the knight, "and your answer must be given now. There is the share of treasure which you will receive should the expedition prove successful, and then there will be the honour which his Majesty will do to each one of us. In all there will be a hundred gentlemen and men-at-arms, whom the brigantine can just accommodate. Now, will you come?"

"Willingly," said Roger. "The share which is promised will be suitable, and I promise to do all that I can to make the expedition successful. Should we fall in with the Spaniards, I shall be able to deal with them, for I speak the language."

Off to the Terra Firma

“And if the tongue fails, I warrant he will be able to deal with them in other ways,” laughed one of the gentlemen present. “We are fortunate in having this young giant. Now, Sir Thomas, we have to find a sailing master, and our crew is completed, for the men-at-arms have already been enrolled.”

In fact, those who were leading this expedition had little difficulty. There were too many applicants, for it wanted but a day for the secret to leak out, and it flew swiftly through the city of London. Seafaring men, old sailors, and adventurers came forward in scores, and from amongst them the most suitable were chosen. Then, having filled up with provisions and water, and having taken aboard a plentiful supply of gunpowder and arms, the brigantine slipped from her moorings, and slid down the River Thames. A thousand eyes followed her as she went. Nor did the knight, who commanded her, and his crew meet with the smallest adventure till they had crossed the Atlantic Ocean, then an almost unknown sea, at least to the English, and come into the neighbourhood of the island of Cuba. A fair wind carried them directly on their course, and during the voyage they met with few matters of great interest. As for Roger, once he had recovered from his sea-sickness, he found the life delightful. In spite of his height and his look of age, he was as much a boy as any young fellow of eighteen years, and skylarked about the vessel with Philip Heasman, son of one of the gentlemen adventurers who had taken shares in the ship.

“I love to look over the side and see the water running past us, Philip,” he said, once they were

Roger the Bold

out of the channel, and had come to a part where the sea ran in long low swells. "Then at night I lie in my bunk and listen to the swish of the water alongside, and that sends me to sleep."

"And keeps you so till some one has kicked you to awaken you again," laughed his friend. "I declare that I have a big task every day and night, for when we are off watch you seem to sleep all the time, and I have to look to it that you turn up on deck at the appointed hour. I suppose it's because you are so long, and have overgrown your strength."

"Hardly that. Look here, Philip. That doesn't look like overgrown strength. At any rate, it doesn't seem to be what one could call weakness."

As Roger spoke, he seized one of the small cannon by the muzzle with one hand, and with a heave lifted the gun and its attached carriage till the muzzle stared up at the sky, while the base rested on the deck. Then he set it down again in its old position as gently as though it had been a featherweight.

"A fine performance; but still, not as much as you will be able to do one of these days," said Philip, critically; "and I maintain that you are grown too much, and that the rapid spring-up which you have made has robbed you of strength. That is why you are for ever sleeping, and why you loll and rest at all times. Why, in a matter of a year or so, you will be able to do what you have done without an effort, and with two fingers. You will even be able to lift the portly Peter Tamworth right over your head."

The little sailor happened to be passing along the deck at that moment, and Roger seized upon the opportunity with eagerness.

Off to the Terra Firma

"Lift Peter!" he cried, with a derisive laugh. "He is but a child. See him soar aloft."

He swung round and seized the sailor by his clothing. Then, with a swing, he tossed him into the air, and held him at arms' length above his head, while Peter shouted angrily.

"What fool's work is this?" he demanded, as Roger set him down again, while the men-at-arms, who had watched the little exhibition of strength, roared with laughter. For Peter was a character, a jolly fellow, apt to cultivate a bosom acquaintance with all with whom he sailed. But, on this occasion, dignity had in some small measure altered his habit, and he stood aloof, as far as his merry nature would allow.

"Would you toss our leader so into the air? Then, why choose me? My faith, were I in command, I would send you to the peak in the bight of a rope, and let you swelter there for a day."

"If you could get him to the rope, well and good, Peter," laughed Philip, patting the angry sailor. "But, think of the strength of this young bull. I warrant, he could hold you with one hand, and lash you with the other. Mayhap, seeing that you do not lead this expedition, he may feel desirous of sending you to the peak to see how the trick looks. But be not angry. Our friend was just trying his strength or weakness, for I maintain that he is weak rather than strong."

"Then let him keep this weakness for the Spaniards," grumbled Peter, "and try not his strength on me. Look over there, comrades. Cuba is in sight—the island where it is said these Spaniards caused the natives to slave so that they

Roger the Bold

died within a few years. 'Tis well for us that we are away in the offing, for there will be ships there, and many men to man them. If they caught sight of us, we should be surrounded, and then where would be this city on the Terra Firma, and the treasure we seek?"

His words brought the men-at-arms, Philip and Roger, to the side of the vessel, leaning against which, they fixed their eyes upon the speck of blue in the distance, which they were told was Cuba.

"Perhaps another week will take us to the north of Yucatan," said Peter. "After that no one can say how long it will be before we run on to the main land. But we shall doubtless halt at Yucatan and take in water and fresh food, if the latter can be found. Does any one see a sail?"

All stared out across the water, but though they watched for many hours, nothing was seen save the land in the distance. And as evening came the latter became larger, and those gifted with the best sight could make out hills and mountain chains. Roger even thought that he caught the white sheen of a sail. But it was getting dusk, and he could not be certain.

"As like as not it was one," said Sir Thomas, when our hero brought the report to him, "for I have information that the Spaniards keep many ships here, and that they are making large preparations to reinforce this Fernando Cortes with men and ships. But we shall be far along the coast by to-morrow, and our course will take us out more. Did you think, Roger de Luce, that we should have accomplished so much in one single month from our sailing from the port of London?"

Off to the Terra Firma

"I had expected to be many weeks on the voyage, sir, though I am ignorant of the time usually taken. But I remember that while in Spain it was told me that the great Columbus had taken a very long time, and that when in these parts his men had begged of him to turn back, for they thought that they had gone so far that to proceed would make return impossible."

"And yet he persevered against their wishes, and discovered Hispaniola, and afterwards Cuba. And he took many weeks, while we are but four from London. We are fortunate, and in two weeks from this should be on the coast for which we aim. Then we must search for natives, and a captive Spaniard would be of service, for then you could question him."

Roger made his salute, and retired to the lower deck, where he soon turned in. At midnight he and Philip came on the deck again, to take their watch, and strolled up and down. A fine moon was up, and the sea could be observed for miles around them, looking silvery white in the rays.

"Wait," said Roger, after they had trudged up and down for nearly an hour, both busy with their thoughts, "I fancied that I saw another ship. Perhaps it is the light given by the moon, which is rather deceptive, but—look yonder. Is that a sail?"

"I also thought so," was the hesitating answer. "But I could not be certain, and now there seems to be nothing. Listen! Did you hear a call?"

They stood at the rail, staring out at the water and listening. But it must have been their fancy, for though an hour passed and still found them

Roger the Bold

attentive, they neither heard nor saw anything to arouse their suspicions.

"We imagined the whole thing, then," said Roger, "though I fancy still that I actually caught sight of a sail. Suppose these Spanish fellows had heard of our coming, and were lying in wait."

"If they had heard they would certainly be on the look out for us. But you forget, Roger. Our expedition was planned not more than five weeks ago; and it is said that the king commanded secrecy then. Who could have sent the news to Spain? And granted that it reached the court at Madrid, how would a boat have sailed to Cuba in time to bring the information? For we have made a rapid voyage, quicker, we are told, than is usually accomplished by the Spaniards."

The argument seemed conclusive, and Roger sought for some other means of explaining the sail which he thought he had seen. Had he and the others who took part in this expedition but known it, the suspected sail was a ship in actual fact, which for many a week had been cruising off the coast of Cuba. For Spain jealously guarded these new possessions of hers, and the governor of Cuba and of Hispaniola had orders to watch the narrow seas about them. Then, too, it happened that one of the prisoners taken aboard the Spanish treasure ship had contrived to send information of the capture to Ferdinand, and had narrated how the plaque and the other valuables had fallen into the hands of the French, and afterwards into those of the English. It was a serious loss, and steps were at once taken to oppose any who might be tempted to find the land of gold and the city referred to on the plaque.

Off to the Terra Firma

Early on the following morning, when Roger lay coiled up in his bunk, a shout startled the ship and brought all to the deck.

"A sail! A sail! A Spanish ship!"

It was Peter Tamworth who had made the discovery, and he voiced it at the top of his power.

"A Spaniard, bearing down upon us from under the land."

"Then I was right," whispered Roger in Philip's ear. "There was a ship near us last night. Look now! One can see her fairly well, running from the land. We seem to be nearer in than we had intended to be. She is a large vessel, I should say, and therefore we shall have to fight."

That this was so became clear to all aboard in the next half-hour, for the Spaniard, a big vessel, with prow which stood high out of the water, bore down upon the brigantine, sailing two feet to her one, and to show the feeling aboard her, fired a gun as soon as she was in range.

"A queer sound, and one which makes one feel inclined to dip below the rail," said Philip, with a laugh, as the cumbersome ball skipped along the surface of the water, and sank at the forefoot of the brigantine. "What answer will our leader give?"

"The one you might expect. We have as much right here as any, and are not to be ousted because the Spaniards happened to be here first. But we shall not waste powder. Our guns are far too small. Let them get to close quarters, and then I warrant we shall talk to them. Give me a crossbow before all."

Roger swung his weapon from his shoulder, and looked to the locks.

Roger the Bold

“One of these days it will happen, perhaps, that the arquebus will be improved, and made easier to carry. It is too heavy by far now, and takes too long to fire. For those reasons it cannot compare with this weapon. At one hundred yards I will guarantee to bring down a man if he does not move.”

“You will hardly find one willing to oblige you,” was the answer. “Ho! That was a close one. I should think that we shall be badly pounded before we get the range of them.”

“Unless we run up towards the enemy, and so get to action sooner,” remarked Roger. “That is what I should do, and I think our leader will. Yes. There goes the tiller, and the master is calling to us to shift the braces.”

In those days every ship carried her fighting crew, who also saw to the sails; and it happened that aboard the brigantine, amongst the adventurers were many who were sailors as well. And thanks to that fact, those who, like Roger, had been ignorant when they first embarked, had quickly picked up the mysteries of sailing. They obeyed the master's order, therefore, and very soon the brigantine was heading for the Spaniard.

“Let every man lie down behind the rail till I shout,” called out Sir Thomas, stationing himself on the lofty stern of the brigantine, “and come hither, Roger de Luce. It may be that they will desire a parley, though it hardly seems so, considering that they have fired upon us so early. Now,” he said, when Roger had clambered to his side, “how many men does yonder vessel carry?”

“That I cannot say, sir,” answered our hero, “for I spent the greater part of my life in Spain, at

Off to the Terra Firma

Madrid, though once I was at Cadiz. But she is a large vessel, Sir Thomas; and seeing that she has been cruising here, for I am sure now that I caught a glimpse of her last night, I am sure that she will have many men."

"Then their numbers shall confuse them. We will carry them by the board, and so escape their shot. Move the tiller over, master, so as to put their aim out."

Bang! crash! It was very certain that the Spaniard carried heavy metal, for one of her shots came aboard the brigantine at that moment, and ploughed through the deck, rending the timbers, and scattering splinters on either side. Then a second hulled the Englishman, stripping away a length of bulwark, and killing or disabling half a dozen men. Roger looked down at the scene of havoc for a little while, feeling dizzy and upset at the sight; for huge though he was, and a powerful fellow, he was a child in experience—a light-hearted, overgrown fellow, who had as yet seen little of the rough side of the world.

"An ugly sight, which makes the head swim," said the voice of Sir Thomas. "But use makes one hardened. When you have seen all that I have, you will pity those who are hurt, but will let your feelings go no further. Ah! we are likely to suffer heavily, unless we can soon come to close quarters."

For ten minutes and more the Spaniard hulled the brigantine, while the latter made fruitless efforts to come close to her adversary, and had, so far, not returned a shot. Meanwhile, her crew had suffered heavily, and many of the men-at-arms and the adventurers had been killed or severely wounded.

Roger the Bold

"She is playing with us!" shouted Sir Thomas, at length, seeing that the Spaniard did not approach closer. "She relies upon her superior sailing, and is trying to circle about us. Bring her about, master, and jamb us into this craft."

He stamped on the deck with vexation, for it was maddening to see his men thus cut down without being able to retaliate. However, a crafty move on the part of the master met a change of course of the Spaniard, and at once the ships began to run towards one another, the brigantine looking ridiculously small beside the Spaniard.

"Shall I keep an eye on their steersman?" asked Roger, seeing that a move on the latter's part might yet take the enemy away. "If he puts his helm over, we shall have their guns pouring their shot down our decks, while our own small cannon will hardly serve better than my crossbow. See, Sir Thomas, a shaft from my weapon would reach from here."

"'Tis a good thought. Hold the fellow in your eye, and if he makes a move to throw us apart, fire at him. Stay here while I go to the gunners."

By now the crew of the brigantine were overflowing with eagerness, for it had been hard work lying behind the rail to be fired at without hope of retaliation. Now the chance was coming, and the men could be seen moistening their hands ere they seized their pikes or cutlasses, while the gunners blew at their port-fires and squinted along the cannon. Not that they could take aim yet at the enemy, for the latter was on a course which would take her across the bows of the brigantine, and it was impossible to slew the guns round sufficiently.

Off to the Terra Firma

"We must make the most of the opportunity when we are near," said Sir Thomas, as he returned. "But I fancy that they will run on this course till almost crossing our stem. Then they will come over and sail on our course, while their stern guns pour shot into us. You must see that the movement is not carried out."

Roger nodded, and drew back the bow of his weapon, fitting a shaft with care and accuracy. He had been accustomed to the weapon from his earliest days, since he had had the strength to use one, and he was a fine shot.

"He is about to move, sir," he suddenly exclaimed, bringing the crossbow to his shoulder. "Yes, he is pushing at the helm."

Thanks to the high stern of the enemy, it was easy to pick out the steersman and to observe his movements. By now the Spaniard was about to pass the bows of the brigantine, and as she came to that position, the steersman pushed at the helm, while men were seen running to the braces. Roger took a quick aim and fired.

"Hit!" shouted Sir Thomas. "A brave shot, and see what it brings us."

He pointed excitedly, for the tiller had fallen from the hands of the Spanish steersman, while the unhappy fellow, struck in the breast by Roger's shaft, staggered against the rail of the vessel. The failure to steer at that moment was fatal, for instead of coming up into her new course, the prow of the Spanish ship paid off at once, and she swung across the stem of the brigantine. Instantly the master aboard the latter put his helm over a little, and ere the enemy could recover from their astonishment,

Roger the Bold

or send a relief to the helm, the English ship was forging along on an almost parallel course which, thanks to the fact that the other vessel had almost lost way, brought her quickly into range. Then, indeed, did the men-at-arms and the adventurers give back what they had received. Crossbow bolts and arquebus bullets flew at the Spaniards, while the little cannon shot forth their missiles. Then the prow of the brigantine struck the enemy heavily on the beam, and, sheering off a few feet, came into contact again.

“Aboard her! To the rails!” shouted the English leader.

He seized his cutlass, and sprang on to the rail. A rope gave him an opportunity of clambering up the high sides of the enemy, while Roger's stalwart arm gave him a heave which sent him with a swing on to the higher deck. Then our hero followed, Philip hard on his heels, while the remainder of the ship's company swarmed up wherever and whenever they could, leaving a few to lash the vessels together. A moment later all were engaged in a fierce struggle with the Spaniards, at whose head fought a noble in complete armour.

CHAPTER III

Roger the Lieutenant

THE men of England clambered aboard the huge Spaniard like so many monkeys, pikes and swords gripped in their hands. Roger, accompanied by his bosom friend Philip, followed close on the heels of the commander, the former carrying a pike, while Philip bore a short sword.

“Rally! Rally, men of England!” shouted Sir Thomas, as he ran forward to oppose the Spanish leader. “Throw yourselves upon them and sweep them from the decks!”

“We have them in our hands,” called out the Spaniard. “We outnumber them by two to one. Now, one rush and they are gone back to their own cockleshell. Together! cut them down!”

There was no doubt that both sides were stubbornly determined to gain the day, the Spaniards perhaps because they hardly knew what it was at those times to meet with defeat, and the English because of their natural determination to win, and perhaps for the reason that defeat meant so much to them. It was therefore with furious courage that they attacked the enemy, their leader crossing swords with Sir Thomas. Roger found himself opposed to a man of medium height, who wielded a sword with wonderful dexterity.

Roger the Bold

"We have a giant to fight against," cried out this veteran, with a laugh. "Then see how I will cut him down. See me slay the English giant."

"And look to yourself that the giant does not run you through!"

In the excitement of the moment Roger forgot all caution, and wildly lunged at his enemy. But this Spanish man-at-arms was a well-trying warrior, and he stepped aside with an easy movement, and with a disdainful smile on his lips.

"For all your height, but a child, Englishman," he said. "I will kill you before five minutes have passed, and then will your side be without its interpreter."

He set to work at once in earnest, and Roger had as much as he could do to defend himself. Indeed, he was never able to take the offensive, for the merest attempt at a lunge was met so swiftly with such a rapid presentation of the point of the sword wielded by his opponent, that he narrowly escaped. And if he could not touch his enemy, the Spaniard could not do as he had sworn. Twice he had contrived to slightly wound Roger; but our hero merely smiled, for they were but pricks. And now the press of the conflict was separating them. On every side men fought like furies, the clash of weapons being heard amidst the shouts. Here and there a man fell heavily to the deck, or staggered to the rail, there to lean against it while his hands clasped the wound.

But the English were gaining the centre of the deck. At the voice of their leader they advanced together by means of rushes, slashing fiercely, and sweeping the enemy back. And it was in one of

Roger the Lieutenant

these that the Spaniard who had opposed Roger endeavoured to fulfil his promise. He gave way before the onslaught of the enemy, enticing Roger to follow. Then he turned like a tiger at bay, and fell upon the Englishman.

"A promise is a promise," he said. "Now I will kill you as I said."

He very nearly accomplished his purpose too, for his sword descended with tremendous force on Roger's steel cap, severing the handle of the pike on its way. Indeed, had he been a foot shorter the blow would certainly have killed him. But it merely dented the steel cap, and caused him to stagger forward, dropping the end of the pike. It was a fine opportunity, and the Spaniard seized upon it.

"He felt the blow," he shouted. "Now he shall not feel it so much. This to settle the matter between us."

But he had spoken too quickly, for though Roger had staggered forward on to hands and knees, and, in fact, was in a position where his adversary could easily despatch him, yet some fortunate chance caused our hero to act in a manner which saved his life. Had he snatched at the severed pike and tried to rise he would certainly have been cut down. But finding himself sprawling forward at the feet of the enemy, he stretched to his full length on the deck, and with a rapid movement grasped the legs of the Spaniard and lifted them from the boards. Then he flung them upward so quickly that the man crashed back upon the deck, striking it a heavy blow with his head. A second later Roger had taken his sword and had rejoined his comrades.

Roger the Bold

"A narrow escape," gasped Philip. "You gave the fellow a fine toss, and one which will last him a lifetime. Look at him; he moves, and is crawling away. If looks could annihilate, then our giant would be gone. But what will be the next move? That toss you gave seems to have been the signal for a pause in the fighting."

This was, in fact, what had happened. By mutual and unspoken consent the combatants had drawn away from one another for the moment, and stood glaring across the narrow stretch of deck, while they leaned on their weapons and breathed heavily. But the respite was not to be long enjoyed, and presently, at a shout from Sir Thomas, the men from the brigantine threw themselves once more upon the Spaniards.

"We will drive them to the far end of the deck," he said, "and then do you, Roger de Luce, call upon them to surrender. Now, my men, let us see who likes fighting the best."

There was no lack of enthusiasm amongst the gallant crew which had so recently sailed from England, and though the enemy were stubborn, and fought with a fury and disregard of danger which had already won them fame, they were compelled to retire before the attackers. Struggling for every inch of the deck, they were slowly forced back till the tall poop stood as a barrier behind them. Then it was that Roger's knowledge of the language saved his countrymen.

"Beware, Sir Thomas!" he shouted, working his way to their leader. "I heard the Spanish captain calling upon his men to prepare to spring aside while the guns were fired. They are screened

Roger the Lieutenant

behind the men, and the gunners are ready now with the port fires."

"Then let every man fall flat upon the deck when Roger de Luce gives us the word," shouted Sir Thomas "Now, on to them again!"

A minute later there was a loud call from the Spanish leader, and at once the enemy broke from the Englishmen, and fled to the rails of the ship, disclosing a couple of big guns in rear which till that moment had been practically hidden. But now they were ready to sweep the English into the sea, and were crammed to the muzzle with all kinds of bullets and scraps of iron and lead.

"Fall flat!" shouted Roger, setting the example by throwing himself prone upon the deck. "Down, every one of you!"

The warning had come none too soon, and undoubtedly, had it not been for his knowledge of the Spanish language, the English crew would have been annihilated. As it was, they were barely upon their faces before two loud explosions shook the galleon, and a mass of iron and lead shrieked over them, and, spreading widely, ploughed a huge hole in the bulwarks. It was a lucky escape, in fact, and Sir Thomas at once prepared to make the most of it. But he was to meet with still more trouble, for the Spaniards were not yet beaten, and still outnumbered his own men. And, worse than that, a shout from one of them, and a turning of the heads of all, called his attention elsewhere. Then he gave vent to a cry of consternation.

"Another ship, and larger than this, I fancy," he called out. "She is bearing down upon us from the island, and will be here in less than an

Roger the Bold

hour. We are lost if we do not retire. Back to the ship, men. Cut the lashings and let us be gone."

"But then we shall be followed by this same ship, sir," shouted Roger. "Cut her masts down before we go. It will take only a few minutes, and the axes are here."

He waited to see whether his commander would approve, and then rushed to the rack which stood at the foot of one of the masts, and which held three big axes, placed there for the very purpose for which they were now to be used.

"Come, Philip," he shouted. "We will have the masts so weak in a minute that they will not carry canvas, while our comrades can hold the enemy. There. Take an axe, and cut to the leeward side."

They fell upon the axes with even greater fury than they had shown some minutes before, and at once attacked the larger of the two masts carried in the waist of the galleon. A third rose from the poop; but this could not be got at, and in any case was unimportant, for it could not carry sufficient canvas to matter. And as they hacked at the wood, Sir Thomas and his men held the enemy in check, beating back their frantic efforts to gain more of the deck and frustrate the efforts of the two who were cutting at the masts. Roger and his comrade took not the slightest notice of them, but instead ran to the second mast as soon as the first had been more than half cut through.

"It will fall the instant the ship is put into the wind," said the former. "If we were to cut deeper it might fall now, and then we ourselves and the men might be hurt, or even the spar might damage or

Roger the Lieutenant

imprison the brigantine. Now let us finish this one."

A minute later they shouted to Sir Thomas, and at the latter's orders the men began to retire slowly, keeping their faces to the enemy all the while. The latter did their utmost to hamper the retirement, and rushed down upon the English furiously. But they could make no impression. The same stubborn, unbroken front was presented, and at the last moment, when many of the men had already regained the brigantine, a final rush and a furious onslaught sent the enemy flying.

"Now over the rail and into our own ship," said Sir Thomas. "But first let us put their cannon out of action. Come, we have men here who have the strength, and those friendly discharges which should have swept us away have done us a service, for they have cleared the rails. Throw yourselves upon the weapons and topple them overboard."

It was an excellent step to take, and Roger and his comrades carried the work out in a manner which did them the utmost credit. A few cuts with sword or axe severed the ropes which held the guns to their rings. Then a dozen pushed at the ponderous weapons, and one by one four of them were thrown into the sea.

"Now retire," said Sir Thomas; "and do you, Roger de Luce, ask the name of the commander here."

Our hero at once stood forward, his axe over his shoulder, and his dented cap tipped to the back of his head. A fine, gallant young fellow he looked, too, with his fair hair and his open features. His head was held erect, and there was a look about him

Roger the Bold

which told of infinite assurance in himself and his comrades.

“From my master, the commander of the brigantine,” he called out. “He desires to learn the name of the brave commander of this Spanish galleon.”

“Then answer thus.” The leader of the Spaniards stepped to the centre of the deck, his helmet discarded, and showing a bearded, strong face. He was covered in every other part by beautifully made armour, and a sword was gripped in one hand. Resting the tip of it on the deck, he leaned upon the hilt and looked towards Sir Thomas. “I am Don Cabeza de Vaca,” he said, “and I would ask for the name of my opponent.”

“He is Sir Thomas Brice, commander of the brigantine.”

“Then tell him that I honour him as a valiant foe, and that I counsel him to depart from these waters. If he escapes the ship which now bears down upon us he will meet with others, for we are on the watch. He will be wise to retire to England, for in these waters he will meet with opposition, and if captured will be executed. This is my friendly warning to a gallant foe.”

Roger rapidly translated the words, and waited for his leader's answer.

“Tell the brave Don that I thank him for his advice, but cannot follow it, even if I would. Let him know that nothing shall keep me from sailing on.”

A minute later the Spaniard retired to the centre of his men, and Roger clambered over the rail and down to the deck of the brigantine. Already the majority of the lashings had been cast loose, and a

Roger the Lieutenant

few cuts with a knife severed what remained. Then the vessels drifted apart, while the crews watched one another. But there was a strong breeze blowing, and the sails catching this, the brigantine very soon left her opponent in the distance. As for the Spanish vessel, it turned out that things happened as Roger had prophesied; for the minute that she was thrown on to a course to follow the English, the pull of her sails caused the weakened masts to crack, and they came thundering down across her decks. She was left a complete wreck, disarmed and helpless.

“We will crack on every stitch of canvas which we possess,” said Sir Thomas, as the brigantine increased her distance from the vessel with which she had just been in action. “What are our chances, master? Will yonder big galleon overhaul us easily?”

“Ay, Sir Thomas. She will sail five feet to our four, and will come up with us. But when, is the question which we have to settle. It is just past noon now, and she is some leagues away. I should say that her guns will speak to us as the dusk falls, and we shall disappear in the darkness as she gets to closer action. Then your honour must decide which course to take. You might attempt to take them by the board, as in this last case.”

“And in that should lose more of my men. No; I think that I will take a shrewder action, for I cannot afford to lose more. Even now I do not know what our losses have been, though I fear that they are heavy. But at night the gravest accidents happen. We might run us aboard this galleon, and when we were on her deck some of the enemy might

Roger the Bold

cut the lashings and send us adrift. Come hither, Roger de Luce, well called our giant, for you are strong in limb, and a power to us also in that you are our only interpreter. Glad am I to see you secure and safe, for at one time, as I looked in the midst of the *mêlée* I thought that that red-bearded Spaniard would give you the *coup de grace*. You flung him finely, and by a clever trick, quickly thought on, and still more rapidly adopted. That shows that you have a ready wit besides strength of arm, and reminds me that to you we owe the fact that yonder galleon is not now pounding us with her shot. For had the masts still stood, she would have covered them with canvas and come after us, with the hope of taking us before the arrival of her consort. Such efforts do men make to obtain the whole share of honour and warlike glory. Yes, 'twas a fine manœuvre, and it has placed them out of action. We owe you much, and, as a sign of my good favour, I herewith appoint you my lieutenant, for there are vacancies, I grieve to say. Now, you have given us a lead before; the master says that as the dusk falls yonder ship will have the range of us, and that as night comes her shot will be pounding into us. What shall be our action in these circumstances?"

He stood leaning on his sword, still breathing heavily, for he had fought with all his strength and energy, and had made an able and gallant leader. Nor was his appearance less dignified or grand than that of Don Cabeza de Vaca; for he also was dressed in the full armour of that period, armour beneath the weight of which many a man would have groaned, particularly in that hot climate. But Sir Thomas was in his own way a fine Englishman, sturdy and

Roger the Lieutenant

broad-shouldered, and hardened to much fatigue by long warring with France. The point of his weapon pierced the deck as he leaned upon it, while he pushed up the portion of his helmet which protected the face, and hooked it into position so that it would not fall again.

"Come, Sir Giant," he said with a gay laugh, the laugh of one who knows that he and his men have done well, and who feels relieved and gratified thereby, "tell us whither to go next, and how to hoodwink these crafty Spaniards."

"Will the master say what would happen were we to keep steadily on this course during the night?" demanded Roger, flushing at the honour done him, and at the thought of his promotion, a promotion quite unexpected.

"I can say that with ease," was the answer, as the master cast an eye aloft and shouted to the sailors to direct them as to the spreading of more sail. "We may put on sheet after sheet, and still that galleon will outsail us, for she has bigger masts and yards, and carries a bigger proportion of canvas. She will overhaul us of a surety, and were the night promising to be dark, might easily ride past us. But the sky is clear. Fine weather is before us, and the moon rises at an early hour."

"So that to continue as we go will mean another action, with an enemy who is fresh, while we are sore knocked about, and who, moreover, has a galleon to fight from, while we have only a brigantine, which looks more like a ship's boat beside these Spanish monsters."

"That is as I have said," admitted the master. "If we continue we are face to face with an enemy

Roger the Bold

determined to sink us, and one which can sail round and round us in a ring, pounding us with her cannon. Then, too, the night is bound to be fine, and her marksmen will make fine use of the moonlight."

"If we remain," said Roger, with a cunning smile. "But the moon does not come up at the instant that the night falls. Last evening, when I was on the watch, it did not rise till some four hours were passed."

"Which is early, I take it," said the master. "To-night she will shine within some three hours of the dusk."

"Then we must make the most of those three hours, sir," exclaimed Roger, turning to the knight who commanded the brigantine. "Why should we not set this course, and keep it in full view of the Spaniard till the night comes? Then let us swing round, and, after sailing some leagues to left or right, make up for the island of Cuba again?"

"But, surely, that would be madness," exclaimed Sir Thomas, stepping back and looking at his young lieutenant in astonishment, while he secretly wondered whether he had not, after all, overrated Roger's acuteness, and promoted him somewhat hastily and rashly. "Surely, my lad, that would be placing our heads in the very mouth of this Spanish lion. This island of Cuba is the stronghold of the lieutenants who act for King Ferdinand of Spain, and we may be sure that they will protect it for his Catholic Majesty. Our coming to the island, our being near it, indeed, would lead to a descent upon us in far greater force. Likely enough we should be hemmed in and taken."

"If seen, sir," said Roger, quietly. "My opinion

Roger the Lieutenant

was given in view of the necessity which seems to exist for refitting. Look at the decks! Even our spars will require attention, while the carpenter tells you that two of the Spanish shot struck between wind and water. Those rents have been hastily repaired, and may withstand the strain of the water for a time. But if we were to meet with a storm as we proceed, our case would certainly be worse than were we on the coast of Cuba, with Spanish ships and enemies about us."

The argument was concise and clear, and Roger stood there, looking now at the knight and then at the master, watching their troubled faces, and wondering what action they would take. Would they spurn the advice thus sought from their newly promoted lieutenant,—from him who had come forward with his plan of cutting the masts of the galleon at such a critical moment? Would they decide to take some opposite course than that recommended them by the lad who but a few hours before had been a raw crossbow youth, unused to war, inexperienced in action, and whose sole recommendations were his height, his great strength, and his valuable knowledge of the Spanish language? To Roger it was a moment in his life. He had given thought to this question of escape from the enemy; he saw that the brigantine was sadly crippled, that her crew were badly hurt from the late action, and that refitting and rest were essential to future success. More than that, like Sir Thomas, he realized that a second action with an enemy who were fresh, and with a galleon of even greater power, could end in but one way. The English might beat off the Spaniards—might even, with

Roger the Bold

superhuman gallantry, capture this following galleon; but their numbers would be again reduced, and probably very largely.

“Besides,” he added, as if he had been speaking his thoughts aloud, “even if we do not make for the island, this vessel will follow during the following day, and she or other consorts will discover us. Were we in the best condition all would be well, but we are crippled. Our men are hurt, and, more than that, in the open sea the Spaniards can nearly certainly laugh at us.”

“The lad is right. He has seen farther than we have, and gives us sound and good advice,” said Sir Thomas, slowly, his brow all furrowed, as one could see through the opening in his helmet. “Then you advise that we make for this island of Cuba? Come, Sir Giant, set that brain to work and aid us. We are not too proud to seek help and good counsel from even the youngest, providing he has proved his ability. Often have I seen the humblest soldier do service in this manner when at the wars. And, besides, you have travelled. You have seen strange lands and people, and there is nought like that to educate the mind. Some day, may be, you will command an expedition like this, and look back upon this day when your courage and good sense were put to the test.”

Roger blushed red to the roots of his hair. He drew himself to the full of his height, looking proud and happy, for he had tried. While others merely looked to themselves, his was the mind which thought of the future, which tried to arrange for the welfare of the crew of the brigantine. And for that reason, when Sir Thomas first turned to him,

Roger the Lieutenant

he was ready with his answer. It was, indeed, an honour to be taken so seriously, to feel that the action of the commander of this vessel rested with him, and that his was the brain which had thought out the course which should be taken. He awoke to the fact that the two standing watching him were waiting for an answer, and thereat the colour again surged to his cheeks.

“What next?” demanded Sir Thomas. “We bear up for the island——”

“And endeavour to give these Spaniards the slip as we change course,” said Roger. “Then we steer straight for Cuba, and, with the aid of the moon, come in touch with the land before those ashore can see us. Then again our course should be altered. Westward is our destination, and I advise that we sail along to the western extremity of the island. There, as the dawn comes, we will creep into some inlet, where we can refit, and where, from the hills about, we can set a watch on the country and the sea.”

“A plan which will fall in well with the state of the island,” exclaimed the knight, “for I have information that the western end has few, if any, Spaniards; that the natives who are left on the land have drifted thither, and there defy their enemies. 'Tis said that these Spanish have been vastly cruel to these unhappy negroes, and that death has been busy with them. No wonder, then, if they fly to the farthest point, there to live as easily as possible till the day when their masters come to hunt them down again, to take them to slave in the mines.”

“And better still,” added the master, “for this

Roger the Bold

western end will be sheltered. We shall have the land to keep off the prevailing wind, and therefore shall be able to careen the brigantine without fear of any gale which may arise. I am with you, Sir Thomas, in thanking this tall youth for his service to us. He may be the means of helping us out of a trying dilemma."

"Then it is agreed. To-night, as the darkness becomes intense, we round on to the other course, to the west preferably. Then we steer for a league or two before coming up into the straight run for the island. All is plain. Get your preparations made accordingly, master. And now, master Roger, do you accompany me as my lieutenant. It shall be published to all how you have done service for us, and for what reason you have received promotion. Let us make a round and look to our damages."

They stepped to the ladder of the poop and clambered to the waist of the ship, where the chief damage had been sustained. And here they saw that the shot of the galleon had done mischief which warranted a complete refitting; for one of the shot had torn the deck up for several feet, disclosing the cross beams, and leaving a gap through which masses of water could flow. Then the rail was gone in many places, while sailors were even then busy at work with the carpenter endeavouring to stop the rents between wind and water. A tiny seat had been secured to a rope, and on this one of the men had been lowered over the side. Roger peeped over at him, and found that he dangled with his feet in the water, and that he was engaged in tarring the surface of a stout piece of canvas which he had just nailed over the opening left by the shot.

Roger the Lieutenant

"The fellow is drenched to the skin, and no doubt has had to do a portion of the work by feeling under the water," said Sir Thomas. "But I deem that this rent on the deck is of even greater importance. For we can back those others from within, and that the carpenter is no doubt now seeing to. But this other is too large for our planks, and canvas would be useless, except in fine weather. Were it to blow we should have seas aboard us here, and one huge one might easily swamp us. More than ever do I perceive that you have a shrewd and cunning mind; that you are one of the thinkers, who goes about the world and his business with his wits alert, and not, as many do, half asleep and wandering. To Cuba we will go, and there we will busy ourselves with refitting. Now let us count our losses."

A few questions ascertained the fact that ten adventurers and men-at-arms had been killed, and that some twenty others had been wounded more or less seriously. As Roger and the commander crossed the deck the sailors were at work cleansing them with water drawn by means of throwing a wooden bucket overboard, to the handle of which a rope was attached. Others had wet swabs in their hands, while, again, others were tossing the dead into the sea, a rough and ready, but the only, method of giving them burial.

A few hours later dusk began to fall, and those aboard the brigantine cast anxious eyes upon the galleon. The latter had closed in considerably. Indeed, the master had proved an excellent prophet, for just as the light began to fail a flash spurted from the bows of the Spaniard, the report and the

Roger the Bold

ball itself following afterwards. The missile struck the sea once or twice, ricocheting beautifully; then it plumped into the water some three hundred yards astern of the brigantine.

"By nightfall they will be pounding us," repeated the master, coming to Roger's side. "But we shall outwit them, I think. If not, there is nothing to hope for save victory in an attempt to carry her by the board. Not again can we hope for that lucky shot which struck the steersman and allowed us to come aboard the other galleon."

"Ay! I had forgotten. 'Twas a fine shot indeed," exclaimed Sir Thomas. "And thereby this Roger de Luce showed that he could use his bow. Who knows. It may happen that in the near future the same may be called to greater use, and that this Roger may have to bless his prowess for the preservation of his life."

Who could say, indeed? Who can tell the future? But if the facts were looked at quietly and carefully it was more than probable that Roger would have to make good use of his crossbow. And not he alone; for would not every member of the crew of the brigantine have to fight for dear life once the Spaniards were really encountered. Could this audacious expedition hope to reach the city depicted upon the plaque, and wrest its riches from the Spaniards without bloodshed and fighting? And, besides, what of the owners of this city, the lawful possessors of the treasure?"

Happily few, if any, gave a thought to the matter. The crew, from their leader downward, had a fine assurance in themselves and in their good fortune,

Roger the Lieutenant

and they put aside the danger, hoping for success in their venture.

An hour later night had fallen, and the last of the enemy's guns had thundered. Not a single shot had struck the brigantine, though a few had come dangerously near. There was a cheer from the men as the Spaniard sank out of sight, while all eyes followed the movements of the master.

"'Tis too light yet," he said quietly to Sir Thomas. "I can still see the forward deck and the men on it. When they are gone, then shall the word be given. But let us send to make sure that there is no light in any part of the vessel."

Roger was despatched on this errand, and as he came back with his report that all was right the master was satisfied that the time had come.

"The men are at the braces," said the latter. "I have only to whistle softly and they will pass the signal. Besides, they will feel the movement as I put the tiller over. Now, sir, God grant that we are successful."

He leaned his whole weight against the tiller, and caused the vessel to swerve. Steps, silent and almost unheard, passed across the deck as the brigantine swung into her new course. The sails flapped once or twice. Then the wind caught them again, and in less than a minute she was bowling along at right angles to her former course. It was a time of suspense. Men leaned against the bulwarks staring into the night, while the commander and the master tramped the poop, and hoped that the Spaniards would not see them. An hour passed in silence.

"Over with the helm and man the braces,"

Roger the Bold

whispered the master, and at his order the word was passed. Once again the vessel swayed, and swung to a new direction, and as the moon floated up into the clear sky the brigantine was sailing alone, it seemed, through a silvery waste, her look-out man watching for a sight of the island of Cuba.

“And you are a lieutenant, though you started merely as a crossbow man and as interpreter. Well, you deserve the honour and your good fortune. My father says that it was your action which threw us aboard that first galleon and saved us from further pounding from her guns, and your forethought which prevented her following. And now the ship knows that this new move is the work of the interpreter. Truly, I envy you your new position, but I give you the most hearty congratulations.”

It was Philip who spoke, Philip, who had already made such a friend of our hero. And the pale rays of the moon shining upon his handsome face, showed that he meant every word that he had said. They gripped hands with enthusiasm, and gripped again as the look-out man sang loudly that Cuba was in sight—Cuba, the stronghold of the Spaniards, the island where the men of the brigantine were to meet with events of the utmost importance.

CHAPTER IV

The Island of Cuba

THANKS to the brilliant moon which floated in the sky, the master of the brigantine was able to sail her within easy distance of the coast of Cuba without fear of dashing her upon the land. Then he put his helm down again, and sent the good ship along towards the north-west, his look-outs being on the watch for Spanish vessels. No one ventured to sleep that night, though all were tired out after their engagement. Roger would have slumbered as he stood had not Sir Thomas detailed him to aid the apothecary whom the ship carried.

“Go and see what you can do to aid him,” he said. “The work will interest you after a time, and you will be doing good for your comrades.”

Roger took Philip with him, for the two had become inseparable, and they dived below in search of the surgeon, a wizened man of fifty years, who struggled to do all that was necessary by the aid of a feeble glimmer, all that could be allowed him.

“Right glad shall I be of help,” he said, lifting his head from the task upon which he was engaged. “No lights can be permitted above this deck, and in consequence our wounded have to be on the level of the keel almost. Take no notice of the water.

Roger the Bold

None leaks in now that the canvas has been nailed over the rents."

The wounded aboard the brigantine had, in fact, to put up with rough quarters for the time being, for Sir Thomas had given strict orders that no lights should be used, and had only permitted this feeble dip in the lower-deck space. Round the sides of it were gathered the wounded, some in serious condition, though the majority were able to sit up and talk. The place was hot and stuffy, and smelled strongly of boiling oil, some of which was even then heating over a brazier. But the men did not complain; instead, they discussed the battle cheerfully, for all realized that a stubborn fight had been made.

"We have given them a taste of what is to follow," said one of the men, beckoning to Roger. "But I warrant that but for our giant's help we should not be so comfortable to-night. 'Tis not the pleasantest feeling to know that cannon, and large cannon, too, comrades, are firing at one. One ducks the head perhaps when on deck; but here below, when a chance shot may find its way in all unexpected, and then the blow will be followed by a deluge of water, and perhaps by the sinking of the vessel, why then——"

"It is somewhat distasteful to feel that one must be drowned in a cage, that one must go to the bottom of this ocean as surely as a dog would with a stone about his neck; that is, if the ocean has a bottom, which I doubt."

They took for a moment or two to the discussion of this problem, mentioning many superstitions; for the men of that day were uneducated, and vastly superstitious. They even imagined that once they

The Island of Cuba

had crossed the horizon and sailed over the other side they would be unable to return ; and it was this thought which had been almost the ruin of Columbus's voyage. However, at length they returned to Roger.

"We were saying that shot are not pleasant at any time, and particularly down here," said the first speaker ; "and I was about to tell all who may not have known it that this giant of ours is to be thanked specially for that. Mayhap all know now that it was he who suggested that the masts of the galleon should be cut, and he and this young fellow here carried out the work. Truly, you deserve some recognition."

"Which he already has received," burst in Philip, "and right well he merits it, for it was his shaft which threw the steersman of the galleon out and enabled us to come alongside. He is a lieutenant now, and will command an expedition one of these days."

"Come, come ! All this chatter is not help," burst in the surgeon. "Here are strips of coarse linen, and here a pot of hot oil. Now we will see to those who have as yet had no attention. I will examine their wounds, and then do you and your friend apply the dressings. Already I have seen that severe bleeding has been stopped, so that there will be no great difficulty."

He beckoned Roger and Philip to follow him, and led the way along the row of wounded men. Our hero then noticed that all had received some attention, those whose wounds were deep and severe having a tourniquet or a bandage tied tightly about the limb. The surgeon awoke the first they

Roger the Bold

came to, for the poor fellow had fallen asleep, and quickly exposed the wound. It was in the shoulder, and was a clean cut, evidently the work of a sword, and had penetrated to the bone.

"A heavy blow," he reflected; "and it cut through the leather jerkin and the armour scales sewn to it. Truly a straight cut. The bone stopped the blade, and prevented further mischief. Now, sit so while my helpers dress the wound. Come, Roger de Luce, get that basin of water and bathe the place; then dry and apply the oil when burning hot."

It was trying work for those unaccustomed to such sights, and Roger felt the same feelings of giddiness which he had experienced as the cannon-shot struck the men down on deck. His head swam, and he felt sick. The surgeon noticed his condition at once, and spoke sharply.

"Do not give way to silly fancy," he said curtly. "Get the basin, and let me see you commence to work. Help is required."

The words came at a timely moment, and were spoken in a manner which made our hero writhe; not that the surgeon meant to be unkind, as he explained later.

"I could see that you were a strange mixture," he said, with a grim smile; "that you were brave in the fight, and fertile in resource when difficulty faced you; that you were better at giving wounds and at receiving them, if need be, than attending to the work of fighting men. You would have fainted at the sight, for men do that when their blood is cold and such matters are shown to them. Then I spoke, and you rallied. You glared at me as though

The Island of Cuba

I had given a mortal thrust, and then seized the basin."

"I was determined to be a help, and not a hindrance. I hate being a failure."

"And you strive to succeed in all that you take up," said the surgeon. "A proper desire, and one which will aid in giving you further promotion. There are men, and lads too—and always will be, I opine—who will go about the world drowsily and too lazy to care what happens so long as they can win drink and food. Be one of the opposite sort, I counsel you. But, no, there is no need to do that. You are one of those who would lead a strenuous life."

Roger would, in fact, far rather have suffered anything than have fainted or proved useless at such a moment. Just as he would have grieved had Sir Thomas elected to spurn the advice which he had given within a few minutes of his promotion, so would he have shown distress had he, on this occasion, carried out his orders indifferently. He seized the basin, therefore, reeled for a moment, and then, with an effort of will, composed himself for the strange task; and very soon he became accustomed to it. His hands gently bathed the wounds, while his sympathetic words comforted the men as the hot oil was applied; for it was the custom in those days to dress wounds with boiling fat or oil, and the pain of such a procedure can be imagined. However, the men bore it stoically, and when an hour had passed all were comfortably dressed.

"Your services have been invaluable," said the surgeon, "and I shall desire Sir Thomas to give me the loan of your help again. Now you had better

Roger the Bold

retire. I shall administer a soporific to these men, and then shall extinguish the light. They will sleep till morning, I trust, and awake feeling refreshed and better."

He nodded to Philip and to Roger, who at once sprang up the ladder. They were almost sorry to be gone, for the task which had appeared so difficult at first now fascinated them. Indeed, for many a day after that they came every morning to help the surgeon, and thereby gained much useful information.

When they gained the deck above, and Roger scrambled to the poop with his report for the commander, the moon was falling, and the slanting light made it difficult to see the island.

"We are safe in any case," said Sir Thomas, "unless, of course, there should be rocks hereabouts. In an hour the dawn will come, and then we must search for a hiding-place. Stand beside me, Roger de Luce, and tell me if you perceive a spot which might prove suitable. It must be some harbour protected by the land and hidden by trees or something else which will prevent those on the shore from espying us."

"Trees would be the better, sir," said Roger, quickly.

"And why? Why better than an overhanging bluff, which would completely screen us?"

"Because we shall require wood. Because you have already said, Sir Thomas, that our planks are not long enough to fill the hole in our deck."

"A pest upon it! The lad thinks of everything!" laughed the commander. "I must have you as my close attendant. But, seriously, Sir Giant, 'tis well

The Island of Cuba .

to cultivate this habit of seeking for the best, of planning a course which shall prove most helpful to success. He is not always most successful who leads his men boldly when the moment of danger arrives. Better make preparation beforehand, and ward off the danger altogether, if that be possible. Ah! the sky lightens a little, I think, and we may hope for the day soon. Come, now, tell me of those poor fellows below."

Roger strode up and down the deck with him, telling him of the wounds suffered by each man, and the surgeon's opinion as to their chances of recovery.

"I warrant that fresh air, water, and food will do for them as much even as the worthy apothecary's skill," Sir Thomas said thoughtfully. "Once we find a suitable spot, we will send a force ashore and investigate the country around. Then we will establish posts, and at one of these the sick and wounded shall be placed; for I have observed that men get well and strong when taken from the confinement of a ship, and from the salt provisions which we necessarily carry."

"There is a point yonder, I think!" cried Roger, suddenly interrupting him; "and, if my eyes and this half light do not deceive me, it is thickly wooded."

"They do not deceive you, lad. The point is forest grown," answered Sir Thomas, when he had stared in the direction of Roger's finger. "Mayhap there is a suitable nest for us there. We will see. Call to the master and tell him to put our head over in that direction."

Half an hour later the light was sufficiently

Roger the Bold

strong to disclose the land clearly in that neighbourhood, and it was seen at once that the wooded point was but a portion of a huge forest extending along the coast. In places the trees seemed to come to the very edge of the cliffs, while at others, which perhaps were more exposed, the wood receded, leaving brown patches of rock. The stem of the brigantine was turned promptly towards the land, and she held on that course till the breakers could be seen. Then she swung west again, and sailed along the line of the shore, every one aboard searching for a sheltered cove. Suddenly the cliff was seen to be broken. A tiny bay presented itself, and on the far side the coast continued, lower than before, and consisting of shelving sand and rock. But trees made up for the absence of cliff, and seemed to hem the exit in and hide it from the outside world.

“Yonder point shall be our signal station and our hospital,” said Sir Thomas, with decision. “There shall the wounded drink in all the breezes, while we labour at the ship below. Now, to you, Roger and Philip, I give the task of searching the land about. Others will follow, but they will not go far, for to them will be given the work of making temporary forts, and of sounding the depth of the inlet. When we have your report, we can arrange to careen the ship, but not before. Make your preparations, therefore, and leave as soon as we touch the land. Carry what arms you prefer, and, if necessary, be absent for two days. It is essential that I should know whether Spaniards are near, and if so, how far they are, and whether they are likely to attack us.”

The Island of Cuba

Roger and his friend were overjoyed at the prospect. They had been a whole month on the ship, and the confinement was beginning to tell upon them. Besides, the salted food carried in those days, and the absence of vegetables, made existence on shipboard very different from what it is in these days. Scurvy was a very common ailment, even amongst crews sailing home waters, while amongst those going farther afield it frequently proved fatal, and ruined an expedition. Roger was conscious of a lack of energy, and both he and Philip prepared for the expedition with alacrity, feeling intuitively that a scamper ashore, fresh water to drink, and some wild fruits to eat, would do them a vast amount of good.

“Though we must be careful not to pluck and eat the first that we come to,” said Philip, cautiously. “We are ignorant of foreign fruits, and no doubt shall see many that are strange.”

“Then we must watch to see whether the birds pick them,” answered Roger, eagerly. “In any case, we will carry some biscuit and cheese, and a junk of salted meat. For water we shall have to search, but there can be no doubt of its existence. The woods prove that it is here in abundance. And now for weapons and clothes.”

“A sword is my choice for the former,” said Philip.

“And mine a sword and a crossbow. We want something to eat, Philip, and a shaft strikes the mark silently, and brings down the quarry. I shall take my crossbow, therefore, and some two dozen shafts. An arquebus would be useless, and, besides, were one to be fired, the Spaniards might hear it,

Roger the Bold

particularly if some are ashore. For clothing, I shall go as I am, with a light head-piece, and no other protection. A blanket carried across the shoulder will do for night covering."

"A very complete programme. Then we are ready, you think?" asked Philip.

"Not yet. We have to decide where we shall go first, for there is a big track of land about us. We should make for the highest peak, and from there endeavour to obtain a view far and wide. That will, perhaps, save us a long search, for if Spaniards are here they will have houses, and there will be clearings amongst the trees. We should see those easily, and could make our way to them."

"And then?"

"And then we should want to look into the matter; to see how many there were; whether inclined to be peaceful or warlike, and whether in sufficient numbers to prove troublesome. Also we should do well to arrange a signal with our leader. Now, what shall it be?"

"Why not hoist a blanket. There are trees in plenty, and one blanket hoisted will mean all is well; if two, look out for trouble. The matter is easily arranged."

They went at once to get their blankets and their weapons, both adding a dagger to the last. Then Roger clambered to the poop, and discussed the question of signals with the commander.

"I shall remember," was the answer. "One blanket will be a good sign for us, and I trust that you will be able to fly it. In an hour you should be gone, and soon afterwards I will post look-outs to search for your signal."

The Island of Cuba

By now the brigantine was heading into the tiny bay, while all aboard crowded the decks, sniffing in the smell of the land. Then the sun came out, and the green of the trees flashed, the leaves shimmering in the light. But for the urgent need for silence a cheer would have broken from the men—a cheer of gratitude, for the long confinement had told upon them also. But they preserved silence, and watched eagerly as the vessel forged her way in. Presently, when within some sixty yards of the shore, the anchor was dropped, and preparations made to lower the only boat which the brigantine carried. Then a crew were placed aboard her, all armed to the teeth, while Roger and Philip dropped lightly amongst them.

“Remember that an early warning of danger is valuable,” Sir Thomas cried down to them from the poop. “Send us news that Spaniards are here and threaten our safety, and we shall be prepared. On the other hand, if you tell us that none are to be found we shall be grateful. Now push off. May success follow you.”

Ten minutes later Roger and his friend had gained the fringe of the trees, and turned ere they dived into the undergrowth.

“’Twould be a bad day for us if these enemies came from the seaward side and the brigantine were forced to sail away,” said Philip, suddenly, taking a lingering look at the ship. “We should be in sorry case, Roger, and should have to decide whether to starve or to become Spaniards.”

“In which case we should need to become Catholics and change our religion, or suffer the tortures given by their Inquisition. That was

Roger the Bold

something of which I heard tales when in Spain. But never fear! Our commander would not desert us; and if he were so inclined your father would prevent the action. Now, there is the point above us, and we will make for it."

They plunged into the undergrowth, plucking the leaves from the trees and briars as they passed, for it was delicious to feel the soft material, still wet with the dew. Above their heads rose a network of branches, at first of moderate height, though as they progressed the height increased till it made them marvel.

"No need to stay here for more than a week, I should say," said Roger, suddenly. "If the ship were careened and the shot rents 'tween wind and water mended, we could put to sea again with one of these trees in tow. Then we could cut planks from it at our leisure, and mend the deck. But we shall see. Perhaps there will be no need to hasten."

By now they had begun to ascend towards the elevated part for which they aimed, and presently were on the summit. But trees surrounded them thickly on every side.

"We must climb, or search for some higher spot free of trees," said Philip. "Give me a leg up, Roger, and I will make an attempt to get to the top of one of these giants. Once I am up to the first branch there should be no difficulty."

He threw his sword to the ground, and his blanket also. Then he leaned against the tree, stiffening his frame. Roger stepped towards him easily, and, stooping, grasped his ankles.

"This to show my weakness," he laughed, "Keep rigid, and grasp the trunk as I lift you."

The Island of Cuba

He put out all his power, and slowly and steadily lifted his friend, his grasp never relaxing from the ankles. Higher and higher went Philip, till Roger's arms were full above his head.

"Now stand on one of my hands as I release the ankle," he called out; "then do the same with the other foot."

Very carefully he released the right leg, and shifted his hand rapidly to the sole of the foot, while Philip transferred his weight to the left. Then the operation was repeated with the other leg, till the greatest amount of lift was obtained. By standing up on his toes as far as possible, Philip was just able to reach the lowest branch, and a quick jerk on Roger's part allowed him to grasp it. After that the ascent was easy, and he was soon at the very summit. Thence he stared in all directions, and finally fixed his attention to one particular spot.

"There is a side clearing, and beyond it a lot of rocky ground, free of vegetation," he said, as he came down to the lowest branch and dropped beside Roger. "I thought I saw men walking about, but I am not certain. However, there are houses, for I saw them, and the presence of houses argues men."

"And men argue the presence of Spaniards, and therefore of enemies," added Roger, with a grim smile. "How far was this clearing?"

"Perhaps seven leagues. But the expanse of trees made it difficult to judge."

"Then we will ascertain for ourselves. But, first, shall we fly the signal?"

They debated the matter for a little while; and then arguing that they would soon traverse the

Roger the Bold

distance, they set off through the forest, being careful to take their bearings by means of the sun. Also Philip used his sword every few minutes, cutting a mark on the trees.

"Foresters do that in England," he said, "and we must not neglect to take the same precaution. A man could be easily lost in this forest."

An hour and a half's quick walking took them to the verge of the clearing, for after a little while Philip became more dexterous at the blazing of the trees, while Roger aided him, each making the cut alternately. Then they took the precaution to avoid the denser parts of the wood.

"We may want to retire at a run, and in that case the undergrowth would hamper us," said Roger. "And, besides, if the ground is moderately open we shall be able to see our blaze marks better, and pick them up as we run. I fancy that we have now taken them close enough, though I should like to have something here which would tell us at a glance where our track commenced, without giving the secret to the Spaniards, presuming always that they are here."

"A fact upon which I am ready to stake much. For do natives have houses?"

The question was one which neither could answer, for in those days Englishmen were absolutely ignorant of foreign matters. Negroes they had seen in England, but these were few, and in many cases were born out of their native haunts. Then, though the people of this island knew France and other adjacent countries well, for they had carried war there, they had but the vaguest ideas of the Indies. Vague rumour had come of huge riches—

The Island of Cuba

of gold which was to be obtained without the trouble of mining, of pearls ready at hand. The tales whetted their cupidity and their curiosity, but it led to no inquiry as to the condition of affairs in the Indies, the inhabitants there, and their ways of living. But Roger and his friend, as time passed, learned more, learned that the Caribs of Cuba, and the natives of Hispaniola and other adjacent islands, had been friendly and well disposed to the Spanish strangers; that they were peaceful people, tilling the soil, and living in contentment. Some little gold they had, simply because it was at hand. But they needed no wealth while their climate was so friendly and the land provided their wants. However, with the coming of the Spaniards came the greed for gold. Adventurers of every station and of every character came to these new-discovered lands, eager to make their fortunes. Labour was essential, for these adventurers discovered that gold was not to be so easily obtained once the resources of the natives had been drained. Therefore mines had to be worked, and the natives must work them. Then commenced a *régime* of brutality and tyranny so fierce and so unreasoning and inhuman that Hispaniola was soon depopulated, while in Cuba the natives hanged themselves sooner than endure further miseries. But the Spaniards were not dismayed. They deported natives from other lands, and set them to work as slaves, standing over them with their whips, and giving them in return for labour the right to exist, and sufficient food to attain that object. The history of the Spanish Conquest is, indeed, one long tale of cruelty, a tale which is made even worse by the narration of their treatment of the people on

Roger the Bold

the Terra Firma, the country to which Roger and his friends were bound.

“Let us make use of some of the fallen boughs if there is need to leave the forest,” said Philip. “There are sure to be plenty, and we will lay two in the form of a cross, so that none will suspect that they have not fallen in that manner, while we shall know that they are our mark. But we shall not require to do that yet. We have to spy out these houses.”

The light in their immediate front had now increased, and the two young fellows therefore redoubled their precautions against surprise. They crept forward silently, cutting their blazes by piercing the bark with the points of their swords or with their daggers. Then a sudden break in the trees told them that they were at the clearing.

“We will go on our faces and creep to the very edge,” said Roger. “Now, there is a bush there which will give us shelter, and from behind which we can watch the men who may be in the clearing.”

They fell on their faces and wormed their way forward till the bush covered them. Then they parted the leaves in front, and stared eagerly into the clearing. A number of wooden houses stood there, and one or two had little gardens of flowering plants in front of them. Then a long dark track was seen crossing to the far side of the clearing, where it made its exit through a wide gap in the trees.

“A road constructed of logs,” whispered Roger; “and see the huge mounds of earth.”

“With a Spaniard standing above them with his whip in his hand. And there are natives. He drives them as one would a dog.”

The Island of Cuba

“Say, rather, as one would some wild beast whom one feared or loathed. That last blow was wholly undeserved. Poor folk! How they cringe beneath his lash. I would that some who have the power to thus torture their fellow-beings could change places with their victims. Then, indeed, would there be groaning and anguish.”

Roger spoke bitterly, for in those days the slave trade was almost unknown in England. In Portugal it had existed for many years, and Spain had adopted the custom. But England, in spite of her rising maritime power, and the increase of her sea-borne trade, had not as yet ventured to Africa or to the Indies, as had the Portuguese and the Spaniards, though there had been a few unauthorized expeditions. So that Englishmen were totally ignorant of the dark-skinned races, and held them in higher opinion, deeming them as fellow human beings, deserving of fair treatment. It made the blood boil, therefore, to see such cruelty.

“And here comes their guard,” exclaimed Roger, in low tones, as a dozen men lounged from behind the mound of earth which cropped up into the centre of the clearing. “They are armed, and clad in light armour. I suppose the heat here is too great for much clothing. It looks as if it were the hour for a meal, and the slaves and their masters retiring.”

Very soon they were certain that this was what was happening, for not a soul was to be seen, not even the big ruffian who had stood over the slaves.

“We will take advantage of their absence. They have gone into the houses, and are out of our way. Stay here, Philip, while I creep forward.”

It was ridiculous of Roger to talk of creeping

Roger the Bold

forward. But when he glided off his friend was bound to confess that, in spite of his size, this huge Roger de Luce, the crossbow-man, had a silent step and a way of getting across the ground swiftly, while showing very little of himself. He was gone round the end of the mound of earth almost before Philip had had time to grasp his meaning; while the latter, once he was out of sight, sat up with a start, and taking the crossbow, fitted a shaft and drew back the bow.

“He is venturesome to rashness,” he said angrily. “He will be seen. Presently I shall hear a shout, and back he will come, and an arquebus bullet racing after him.”

However, when Roger next appeared it was from the very opposite quarter, so stealthily that Philip was dumfounded. He would have questioned him, but Roger would not answer. He silenced him with a finger, and then led the way into the forest.

“Can you find your way to the ship alone?” he demanded. “Then do so, and with this report. There are fifteen Spaniards here, and I make out that they are engaged in mining for the Government. I heard them say as much, for I stood outside one of the houses and listened to the talk. They do not suspect our arrival, though they were speaking of the battle, the noise of the cannon having reached their ears. Also they know that an English ship may appear, a golden plaque of vast value, because of the plan it contains, having been taken by our countrymen. But there is more yet,” he suddenly added, seeing that Philip was about to interrupt. “This mine gives a rich store of gold, which is kept partly in bars and partly as dust. I saw the bags, and the

The Island of Cuba

pure metal. Tell Sir Thomas this, and say that a guard posted here might watch to make sure that no one suspected our arrival, and against surprise; and that if the work of repair were hastened, it might be possible to make a raid upon the mine."

"And recoup ourselves for the injury these Spaniards have done us. I follow the reasoning, Roger, and I will return at once. Here is the bow. I promise to lead the way back here at the first opportunity."

He rose to his feet from the position which he had taken, and turned on his heel. There was no protest, no argument, no attempt to alter his friend's decision, or to shake his determination to stay. For Philip was beginning to find out that this huge friend of his, who played and laughed like a boy, was a clever fellow at times, skilled in stratagems, and fertile in resource.

"I suppose he has been thinking it over as he went round," he said to himself as he plunged into the trees. "Anyway, I fancy he is in the right."

He left Roger comfortably seated on the trunk of a tree within sight of the edge of the clearing, and in such a position that he could watch without danger of being seen.

CHAPTER V

A Valuable Capture

THREE hours passed after Philip's departure before Roger saw anything of the Spaniards and their slaves. For the noonday heat was great, and all were indulging in a siesta, the slaves even being allowed this luxury, simply because without their masters to watch over them and to flog them no work was to be expected.

"Better dine and rest myself," thought Roger. "Then I shall be ready for anything. But I must not sleep, though I feel drowsy enough. It would be different were there no Spaniards about. But there are none, and I have nothing to look at save that big brown mound of earth, and the forest trees with a curling line of logs passing out amongst them. Let me see what I have with me; and I must look for water."

He remembered then that as he sat or lay full length in the bush he had heard the tinkle of a stream somewhere near at hand, and at once he was on his feet and in search of the fluid; for though the leaves above sheltered him from the glare of the sun, it must be remembered that for a month he had been unused to much exertion, and particularly had walked very little. On this day, however, he had

A Valuable Capture

scrambled through the underwood, putting aside brambles and creepers at every step. Then he found that in spite of the shade the heat was very great. It was close and sultry beneath the trees, and long ago he had been forced to open his doublet at the neck and sleeves, while the perspiration poured from his forehead. So that it was not to be wondered at that he desired a drink of water. A hundred yards to the right he found the stream, and falling full length, lowered his lips to the surface.

"A good place for an out-of-doors meal," he said to himself; "and as I can see the houses from here, I shall stay."

He took the biscuit and cheese from his pocket, and the junk of salt meat from the satchel carried over one shoulder. Then he cut the latter into two parts with his dagger, and one of the halves into thin slices. A little later a figure startled him, and he observed a tall native emerge into the clearing. He was almost naked, and his dark brown skin was stained with marks of the toil with which he had been engaged. In his hand he carried a bag made of woven grass, while his eyes sought for some shady nook in which he might rest. He saw the big bush which had sheltered Roger and Philip, and he sauntered to it, throwing himself down in the shade.

"Lucky I moved away from the edge of the clearing," said Roger, "and still more fortunate that I kept the clearing in sight. That fellow might see our marks. Sir Thomas tells me that he has heard that they can track any one with the intelligence and quickness of a dog, that a crushed leaf, or a broken twig has a story for them. I wonder what the result

Roger the Bold

would be supposing he happened to discover that some one had been in the bush behind him? He would follow, and perhaps come as far as the ship. That must be prevented. If he moves I will meet him, and will speak to him. If he runs——”

He debated whether he ought to fire a shaft at the native under those circumstances.

“Why should I?” he said. “The poor beggar is obviously a slave, and must hate the Spaniards, for he was one of those who was lashed as we arrived. I wonder whether he speaks Spanish, or whether the Spaniards have learned the native language.”

He was still debating the matter when a movement on the part of the native arrested his attention. He dived into his bag, and produced a long rod of wood. Had Roger been nearer he would have seen that this rod pierced the centre of a flat circular stone bored for the purpose, and that a cross piece provided with leather strings was attached. There was also a piece of hard wood, with a little hollow in it, while from one corner of the bag some brown powder was produced, consisting of dried wood. Roger, in fact, was about to observe the native method of obtaining fire, and marvelled as the man patiently twirled his weighted stick till smoke burst from the hollow in the hard wood. Then he added some of the powder, and as it caught and smouldered, placed a piece of dried and rotten stick against the flame. But our hero opened his eyes still wider in utter amazement when the native rolled something between his brown hands, licked the object carefully and critically, and then placing one end to his lips, applied the other to the flame. Smoke burst from the mouth and nostrils of this strange man,

A Valuable Capture

while he leaned back easily and contentedly, slowly putting out the fire with his other hand, and replacing the stick and the whole paraphernalia in his bag.

“Marvellous!” thought Roger, sitting up in his amazement. “The fellow looks as if he were on fire. What can it all mean? And he seems so contented and happy, for he leans back with closed eyes, and puffs at that long brown stick. Now he is sitting up. Ah! He burned his hand against the end, and that made him start. He is rubbing the place with a leaf, and——”

His words were cut short, while he himself fell flat on the ground, for that accidental burn was like to be his undoing. The native, dissatisfied with the first leaf which came to his hand, turned and sought for some special kind in the grass and herbage growing in the bush, and gave vent to a cry of astonishment. He knelt upon his knees and searched the grass around the bush diligently, and in a manner which showed that his interest was aroused. Then, catching up his bag, he slung it over one arm and rose to his feet, still puffing at the long cigar which he had manufactured; for that, in fact, was the nature of the article which he had in his hand, and Roger was probably the very first Englishman to witness this native custom—a custom which has now become almost universal. But he had other matters to occupy his attention, for it was obvious that the native’s curiosity was thoroughly aroused.

“He is coming into the forest,” exclaimed Roger, in alarm. “He is bending low, and following the tracks left by Philip and myself as if he were a dog, or as if they were as clearly outlined as any road.

Roger the Bold

Ah, he has stopped! That must be the point at which I struck off for this stream."

Discovery seemed certain, but in the hope of escaping observation Roger threw himself into the long grass and undergrowth, and burrowed his way into the thickest part. Then he drew his sword, for even now it was not certain that the native would be friendly.

"He must take his chance," said Roger between clenched teeth. "We have too great a stake at issue to risk the ship and all our lives for the sake of one native. If he discovers me I shall speak in Spanish, and order him to be silent. If he refuses, and attempts to run——"

Could Roger cut him down in cold blood? Could he, taller even than this tall native, set upon him, knowing him to be a slave, for he had so recently seen him cringe beneath the lash of the Spaniards? No! Roger knew well that he could not do that, even for the sake of all his comrades, and for the safety of the expedition.

"Poor beggar!" he thought. "I will not harm him; but at the same time I will not allow him to betray us. I will sheathe the sword, and, if he runs, will jump upon his back and capture him."

By now the native had turned aside, and was creeping along the narrow track left by Roger. He halted every now and again, and picked up a piece of stick, or bent closer to inspect the ground. Once even his face showed traces of astonishment and fear, and it looked as if he would turn back to the clearing. But at heart, and when no whip dominated him, he was a courageous fellow, and presently he came on again till he was close to Roger.

A Valuable Capture

Instantly his frame became rigid with apprehension, and he was about to run, for his eyes had detected the figure lying in the undergrowth.

“Stand and be silent,” said Roger, sternly. “Do not run, or harm will come to you. I am no Spaniard, but come from another part where the people do not love your masters.”

He scrambled to his feet and stood up before the astonished native, who eyed him fearfully, and looked for a moment as if he would have bolted. But Roger’s youth saved the situation. He looked no villain, no cruel taskmaster, but what he was—a jovial, overgrown young fellow, given to kindness to all.

“Not Spanish? There are no others, so we have been taught,” exclaimed the native. “Our masters tell us that they rule the world, and they have made slaves of us here as if by natural right. We are forced to work for them, even to learn their tongue that we may understand them. Not Spanish? Then what?”

“English!” exclaimed Roger, proudly lifting his head. “We are subjects of King Henry the Eighth, and we are as good, and better than these Spaniards. Why should you slave for them? Why not drive them from your island if they treat you so?”

“Because we are too weak to do so. Years ago it might have been possible, when first they appeared, and in small numbers. Now there are more than a thousand, and they are too strong with their guns and their horses. Yes, their horses carry them so swiftly after us, and run us down so easily. Then, too, the vengeance of our masters is so fierce. They punish us with barbarous tortures,

Roger the Bold

and slay us and our wives and children. Life is one long hardship under them. But tell me where you come from? I marked your tracks, and followed. Then, as I turned in this direction, the track told me that a big man had gone this way. I feared it was a Spaniard, for there were prints of boots such as these tyrants wear. It might have been one of the soldiers come here for a quiet rest, and had I wakened him the lash would have followed. But I came on, and—hush, I hear voices! I must be going, for they have started to work at the mine again.”

Roger would have kept him, would have asked him to come to this same spot again. But the native turned quickly and left, as if fearful of being late for his work, knowing well, without doubt, that the lash would be his reward. But he was not to reach the clearing without trouble, for it happened that as he entered the forest in search of the strangers who had left their tracks, one of the Spaniards had sauntered from the houses, and caught sight of the retreating figure. Desertions from amongst the slaves were very common, and the Spaniard at once came to the conclusion that the native was about to make an attempt to get away. He crept after him, therefore, and so quietly that neither Roger nor the man heard his approach. Suddenly, however, as the native ran back towards the clearing, he rose from the path and accosted him.

“What now!” he demanded violently. “A run-away! You will teach the others to give us the slip, and will give us the trouble of following, and setting on the dogs. A lesson is wanted, and you shall see that it is unwise to attempt to leave us so

A Valuable Capture

hurriedly. Work at the mine may not meet your fancy, but there are other matters which are less pleasant."

He eyed the trembling native till Roger thought that the poor fellow would have sunk to the ground in his terror, while he slowly extracted a knife from his belt. Then he searched for a suitable sapling, and having chosen one which was stout and whippy, he cut it off, and severed the smaller branches.

"A whip may sting for a while," he said, with a brutal laugh, "but for long memories, give me a cane after this sort. The pain of the bruise lasts, and every movement is a reminder. Now, come hither, slave, and receive what is your due. Hanging were too good for you."

He seized the poor fellow, and brought his stick down with all his strength, till the native shrieked. Roger's blood boiled. Up till now he remained unseen by the Spaniard. But he could not lie there, a big fellow such as he was, and see a human being treated with such cruelty.

"Why, one would not beat a savage dog so!" he said. "And, moreover, the poor native was not attempting to be gone, though none would blame him had he done so. I won't put up with such brutality."

He leapt to his feet impulsively, forgetting all about the safety of the expedition and his comrades—forgetful of everything save the unhappy native and the Spanish coward who thrashed him. With a bound he was on the path, and in a twinkling he was before the Spaniard, his face flushed with anger, and his pulses beating with excitement. There was a loud cry of amazement; the Spaniard

Roger the Bold

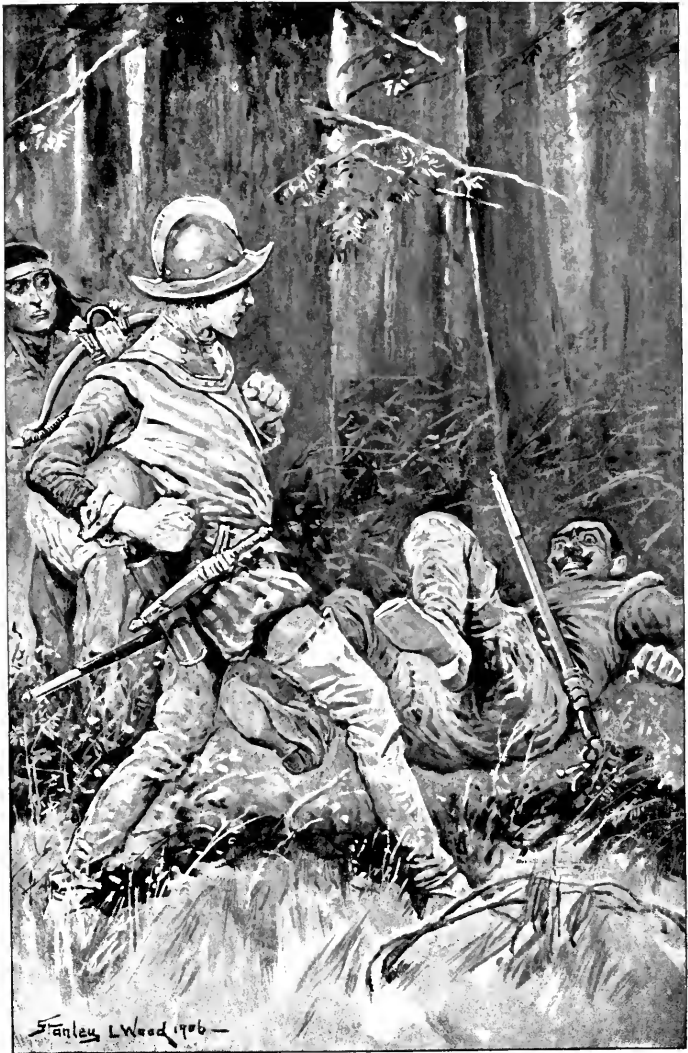
let go his hold of the native, and stared at the stranger till, suddenly, Roger's fist flew out, and, crashing into the Spaniard's face, sent him rolling into the underwood.

"An enemy! The English! The English! Rally!"

The man picked himself up with the agility of a monkey, and gave vent to the warning at the top of his voice. Then his sword swished from the scabbard, and he stepped towards Roger.

"So that is what brought this sneaking cur over into the forest!" he said, with an oath. "He has been parleying with you—you men of England, of whom we have heard. And you and your comrades are here, hoping to snatch this island of Cuba from us. We shall see, and you shall learn that a man of less than six feet is more than a match for one of your height. Yield now, or wait till my comrades come. It makes no difference. You will be taken, and later on the Governor will roast you on the square at Santiago."

Roger did not wait to argue with the man, nor did he accept the invitation to surrender. He heard shouts from the clearing, and caught sight of a number of armed men running towards the forest. In two minutes they would be there, and his escape would be out of the question. Indeed, already he was almost cut off, and unless he moved now he would never get away. Doubtless he would then be burned on the square at Santiago, according to the barbarous custom of the Spaniards. In an instant, therefore, his plan of action was taken. While the Spaniard stood glaring at him, hesitating to attack him, our hero sprang forward so suddenly



Stanley L. Wood 1906 -

11566

“ROGER SENT HIM ROLLING INTO THE UNDERWOOD”



A Valuable Capture

that his opponent was unable to raise the point of his sword. Roger clutched at his enemy, and, lifting him above his head, threw him against the trunk of a tree.

"Come with me," he said to the native. "If you remain you will be killed or tortured by these brutes. Come with us, and you will be kindly dealt with."

There was no time for further discussion, for by now the shouts were sensibly nearer. He darted forward, therefore, and, following the track through the grass, made for the spot where the long line of blazings commenced.

"Master, let me go before you," he heard the native exclaim. "I will come with you, for to remain is to be killed. Let me run in front, and I shall be able to find the track and follow it without loss of time."

"Then get ahead," said Roger, shortly. "You will find that we have marked the trees, so as to show us how to reach the ship again; and if you follow that line we shall be safe. Now hasten, for the Spaniards are near, and I fancy their comrade will be able to speak to them, and tell them what has happened. I missed my aim, for had he hit the tree as I meant he would have been silenced for many a day."

The Spaniard had, in fact, hit the trunk at which Roger had thrown him with the broad of his back, and though the concussion had momentarily stunned him, and knocked the breath out of his body, he was able to speak when his comrades ran to his side.

"Follow!" he gasped. "I came hither after one

Roger the Bold

of the slaves, and found him parleying with a huge Englishman. Their ship—the one we heard of—must have touched on the coast somewhere near at hand, and they sent a scout in to see where we were. Follow, and cut the fellow to pieces.”

The effort was almost too much for him, for he fell back at the foot of the tree and lapsed into unconsciousness. But he had been able to give valuable information, and his comrades acted upon it with alacrity. Fortunately for them, all were fully armed, and therefore they set off into the forest without hesitation and without the loss of a moment. One of their number happened to catch a sight of the fugitives, and this giving them the direction, they burst their way through the forest at a rapid rate. They had no need to follow any particular line, for the noise made by the two fugitives was sufficient indication of the course of their flight. The Spaniards therefore simply rushed through the underwood, careless of the brambles which grew here and there, their eyes seeking for Roger and the native, while their ears listened for sounds of their flight. As for the latter, thanks to the acuteness of the native—an acuteness which Roger marvelled at—they ran on into the depths of the forest almost without a halt. But their progress was hardly as rapid as that of the enemy, for the simple reason that Roger and Philip had made an occasional *détour* to avoid the thick underwood. Then, again, their progress through the forest had not been as direct as it might have been, because they were unused to travelling in such a place. So that, though they ran fast and did not delay, the enemy steadily approached them.

A Valuable Capture

"They are striking to the right again, because of some thick bushes," called out one of the Spaniards who led the pursuit. "Come after me, and I will take you by a route which will cut into their course."

He was a man who had spent many years in the Indies, and was well accustomed to the forests. Indeed, his comrades said of him that he could track out a native as well even as the best of native trackers could have done, and that bloodhounds were hardly necessary if Sebastian were with the party. He plunged, therefore, into the thick of the underwood, thrusting the brambles and twigs aside savagely, and leaping over obstacles such as the fallen trunks of trees. Then he burst into a glade, and swinging to the left, led the party straight ahead, till his eye caught a mark on one of the trees.

"Halt!" he said, holding his pike in the air. "We are ahead of them, I think. Listen! There is the sound of broken sticks as they run, and it is behind us."

"Are you certain? I thought that I heard sounds ahead," exclaimed one of his comrades, standing beside him and breathing deeply, for the sudden call for exertion, their indolent lives, and the weight of their weapons and clothing had told upon them. "There! Listen you, Sebastian! Those sounds are ahead, I wager anything upon it!"

"And I swear that they are behind," burst in another, hotly. "Listen, there is the noise."

"Hush! You will give them the warning. There are men in advance, I think," admitted Sebastian, "but I am sure that these fugitives, this slave and the Englishman, are behind us. Perhaps there are

Roger the Bold

others near at hand, and they will have had no warning. Silence, I say! Let us line the path which is here. You can see the blaze marks on the trees. Then, when we have cut down the fugitives, we will teach the others a lesson."

"A lesson to leave the Indies alone; to meddle with nothing which belongs to his Most Catholic Majesty, Ferdinand."

"Silence, fool!" Sebastian turned upon the man with a snarl which caused the offender to close his lips. Then he crept forward on to the track left by Roger and Philip, and disposed his men so as to catch them in a trap.

"Let there be no hesitation. If the man is armed cut him down, but do not give a mortal blow if it can be helped. We may get information from him. Now, to your places."

Meanwhile Roger and the native had been hurrying along through the forest, their eyes picking out the trees which were marked. So occupied were they with this that they hardly noted the progress made by the enemy, and they would undoubtedly have plunged into the trap set for them had not the acuteness of the native suddenly arrested their flight.

"Lie down," he said abruptly, catching Roger by the sleeve and drawing him to the ground. "There, you can hear their voices. We have been going in a circle, while they have cut straight through. They are on the path before us."

"Then we must cut our way through them. How many were there?"

The native counted the enemy off on the fingers of his two hands, giving the number in the broken Spanish which he spoke.

A Valuable Capture

"Thirteen, I think, master," he said. "There are fifteen at the mine, and one you threw against the tree. One is with the slaves at the works, and that will leave thirteen to attack us. Surely it is impossible to cut a way through them?"

"It must be done!" answered Roger, with decision. "We will creep along till close to where they hide, and if possible we will pass them. If they spy us out we must run, and cut down whoever opposes us. Here is a dagger. Make use of it."

"Hush! The native stopped Roger with a movement. "More sounds," he said. "Wait while I listen."

Creeping along the ground, he placed his ear against the trunk of a big tree, and stood there for more than a minute. Then he returned to Roger's side and whispered in his ear.

"I hear men moving," he said. "They seem to come towards us, and they are making much noise. I do not think that they are the Spaniards, for these sounds come from beyond the spot where I last heard them."

"Then they must be friends," exclaimed Roger, his heart beating faster at the thought. "I had sent for them, and expected them before this. Can we get round to them?"

For a moment the two looked into one another's eyes, Roger longing for the native's answer, while the latter debated whether it would be possible for this big, clumsy Englishman to creep through the forest without alarming the enemy.

"There will be great risk of discovery," he said, "and I advise that I creep through to your friends.

Roger the Bold

Give me a token, and I will hasten to them with it. What message shall I take?"

"Tell them that I have been discovered; that the Spaniards lie between me and them, and that I am cut off. If we have heard their coming, then the enemy have very likely become aware of their presence in the forest. But they do not know their numbers. Therefore we shall still have some chance of surprising them. Tell my comrades to advance, while I will come towards them from this side. Bid them be sure that none of the Spaniards escape, and lest they should do so do you return in this direction and lie in wait. None of these enemies must return to the clearing. But——" He suddenly recollected that the native could not speak English. "Then you must sign to them and bring them along," he said quickly. "Take this whistle, and go."

He lay full length in the underwood, his eyes peering amongst the trees and brambles, while he listened intently. For who could say whether the Spaniards were already coming towards him? No doubt they were accustomed to warfare in these woods, for they had had many a brush with the natives. Then perhaps they were stalking him, and would come just as silently as his native comrade had gone.

Roger shivered at the thought. Then his courage returned, and with that his old assurance. His hand gripped the hilt of his sword, while he lay in such a posture that in a moment he could rise to his feet.

Click! A twig snapped near at hand, and his grip tightened. Was it friend or enemy? There it was again, and Roger became certain that some one was approaching.

A Valuable Capture

"It must be a Spaniard," he thought, "and as I have been still and silent since I dropped in this place the chances are that he does not quite know my whereabouts. I have something which will stop him."

Very softly his hand sought for his crossbow and a shaft. Then he pulled back the bow and waited. Click! The very faintest sound reached his ear, followed by the rustle of dried leaves. He turned his head to the left, and his eye fell upon the tip of a pike. Then he saw the ridge of a steel cap, and behind it the legs of a Spaniard. It was Sebastian, who, conscious of his superiority, had left his comrades to discover the whereabouts of the fugitives, and with the intention of capturing them alone if possible. The sudden cessation of sounds had surprised him, and he had rapidly guessed that the fugitives had halted and were in hiding, or were endeavouring to creep silently away.

"Strange! I do not see them, and there is now not a sound," he suddenly said to himself, as he halted. "A little while ago there were noises from this direction, and we heard other men deeper in the forest. Now none are to be heard, and none to be seen."

He sat up cautiously and looked round him. But only leaves and forest trunks were in sight. Only leaves! No! His eye suddenly caught the glitter of a steel bow, while behind that bow was a steel cap much the same as he wore. Sebastian was startled. Then he leaped to his feet, and taking his pike in both hands, charged down upon Roger with a roar which startled the echoes.

Roger the Bold

“The Englishman!” he shouted at the top of his voice. “Follow! Follow!”

Roger made no movement. He did not even flinch as he saw the point of the pike lowered and the man rushing upon him. Instead, his eye went to the bow, and he aimed steadily for his man. Very gently the tip of the bow went up till it was directed full upon the Spaniard's throat. Then our hero pressed the trigger, and in less than a second Sebastian was down amidst the moss and the ferns and bracken, his pike and his enmity forgotten, while his feeble hands clutched convulsively at a shaft which had passed right through his neck. He attempted to call for help, but failed. For a moment or two he rolled over and over, struggling dreadfully. Then a sigh escaped him, and he became silent; his head fell back, and he lay with arms spread out to their full extent, a victim of his own rashness. He had hardly fallen before a babel of shouts broke the silence of the forest, while the heavy trampling of feet and the snapping of twigs came to Roger's ears. He leaped to his feet, and drawing his sword, thrust the point into the ground. Then he fitted another shaft into his crossbow and waited. A few seconds later two of the Spaniards appeared, and, catching sight of him, ran forward. Then a third was seen, and he came to an abrupt halt, and leveling his arquebus, made ready to fire it.

“Better get behind a tree,” thought Roger; “then the gun cannot do me harm, and I shall be ready for the others. Ah, there is a fourth! I trust that my comrades will be coming soon.”

“He has slain Sebastian. Fall on him! Cut him down!” shouted the first of the enemy, catching

A Valuable Capture

sight of his dead comrade and halting for a moment. "Now, comrade, we will run him through together. Lower your pike and rush."

Sheltered behind a huge trunk, Roger watched them cautiously, and out of the tail of his eye saw the man with the arquebus blowing at his fuse, while he endeavoured to hold the ponderous weapon steadily at his shoulder. A second later the fuse was ready, and he fired, the bullet striking the tree with an ugly thud. But no damage was done to Roger, and at once his head and shoulders appeared, and his cross-bow twanged, one of the charging Spaniards falling instantly. The other kept on without a pause, and, seeing that he was determined to come to close quarters, Roger dropped his cross-bow and snatched at his sword.

"Yield!" cried the Spaniard. "You are surrounded, and your friends cannot help you. Throw down your sword and surrender."

"Never!" answered Roger, quietly. "Yield yourself, for it is you who are surrounded. Now, up with your hands, or I will cleave you to the chin."

The Spaniard gave vent to a hoarse laugh, for he was amused at the insolence of the Englishman. Then he lowered the point of his pike and lunged, striking Roger on the arm. But the hurt was only a slight one, and was returned instantly. Pike parried sword thrust, while the point of Roger's weapon prevented his adversary from approaching too close. He had just succeeded in wounding the man slightly for the second time, when the appearance of five more of the Spaniards made the affair wear a serious look. He cut savagely at his opponent, and was in

Roger the Bold

the act of following the stroke up when an arquebus roared, and the unfortunate fellow who opposed him fell to the ground. Then shouts came to his ear—English shouts—and at the sound of his comrades voices he dashed forward, and fell upon the Spaniards furiously, his sword playing swiftly.

“He is here. He is alive and well. Come forward and surround these men.”

It was Philip’s voice which he heard, and a moment later that individual appeared, sword in hand. Then a second comrade from the brigantine came to view on the right, while others came pushing through the trees.

“Fall on them and cut them down!” shouted Roger; “and see that none escape. Philip, come to my side, and let four others rally here. Now we will make haste to the clearing.”

“There is one of the Spaniards stealing off,” suddenly cried Philip, as he ran to his friend’s side. “Stop him, whoever happens to be in that direction, or he will give the alarm.”

But they had no need for anxiety, though none of the Englishmen appeared in answer to his warning cry. Instead, the tall native thrust his way to the front, and at a nod from Roger set off after the Spaniard. And while he raced through the underwood, the men of the brigantine, headed by Roger, fell upon the Spaniards. There was a fierce fight, swords flashed in the air, lopping twigs from the bushes, and striking heavy blows at the enemy. Three of the latter quickly fell, and within five minutes those who survived had thrown down their arms.

“Form a guard round them, and follow swiftly,”

A Valuable Capture

said Roger. "We will go to the clearing and capture the store of gold which is there. Now hurry, for we must not waste time."

"What if the man who fled has given the alarm?" demanded Philip, coming breathless to Roger's side. "That would wreck all our hopes, for then we could not stay."

"We could manage to get the worst of the damage to the ship repaired. But wait; here comes the tall native whose acquaintance I first made. Now, what is the tale?" he demanded.

"The man ran fast, and, turning, struck at me as I came near. But I fell suddenly, pretending to be hurt, and he turned again to kill me. I seized my opportunity, and sprang upon him with the dagger. He is dead. Has my lord further orders?"

"Run fast to the mine, and bid your friends capture this other Spaniard. We will follow quickly."

Roger waved him away, and then gathered his comrades about him. There were twenty in all, and none had received more than the most trifling wounds.

"All fit for duty, then," he said. "Let ten guard the prisoners, while the remainder come with me. The prisoners and their guard will remain here, for we do not wish them to know what is happening at the mine."

There was a tone of authority in his voice, and, young though he was, the men from the brigantine obeyed him with alacrity.

"He's won his place, and will keep it," said one.

"Nay, he'll not keep it," protested another, as they marched through the trees. "The lad's bound

Roger the Bold

to rise. You can see that he's cut out for a leader. He keeps his head, and is a capable manager. A groat on it that he'll go higher, maybe top the tree, just as he overstands us all in height. A burly young giant, with a good heart and a better head. I, for one, follow him willingly."

"And I. And I."

The men answered eagerly, while they followed the figure of their tall young leader till the clearing was reached. Arrived there, they found the last of the enemy in the hands of the slaves, who had disarmed and pinioned him.

"Were we to deal justice to him, to repay cruelty with cruelty, we should have strangled him slowly ere you arrived," said the native who had come so unexpectedly to be Roger's friend, and whose name was Tamba. "But I knew my lord's wishes, and I will always follow them, for do I not owe him my life?"

"You have done well," said Roger, shortly. "Now gather your friends, and ask them whether they will serve us. But, first, tell me, is this mine far from your masters—from their other settlements?"

"Two days' journey, my lord. A Spaniard would take three."

"And there are no other natives in the neighbourhood?"

"None, my lord."

"Then ask the question and return."

A few seconds later Tamba came back with the information that his comrades were eager to serve their new masters.

"We long to escape from this slavery and ill-treatment," he said earnestly. "We will come with

A Valuable Capture

you on the ship if you wish it. What directions will you be pleased to give?"

"Let ten of your friends remain here for a time; and, Philip, take command of them till I can return. Let the others gather the gold in the storehouse and come with us. We will go to the brigantine immediately."

All was movement at once, and very soon the party was returning, laden with their capture. As for Roger, he had no hesitation in giving the order to take the gold, for they were now open enemies of the Spaniards, and in those days such a capture was looked upon as perfectly legitimate. Therefore every bar and every sack of the precious metal was packed upon the backs of the natives, and the whole party returned through the wood with their prisoners. They were hailed with joy when they reached the brigantine, and at once Sir Thomas demanded the full tale from his lieutenant.

"You have done us valuable service," he said, "and already the gold obtained pays for the expedition. We shall not forget your courage, nor your resource, and shall find a responsible place for you in the future."

Nor was it long before Roger's services were again in requisition, with what result we shall presently see.

CHAPTER VI

A Stranger comes Aboard

THREE weeks passed rapidly in the little cove to which the brigantine had sailed when she had given the big Spaniard the slip ; and those three weeks had worked wonders for the men under Sir Thomas's command, and for the vessel. The latter had been run close into the shore, which was sandy and free from rocks. Then a couple of stout trees had been selected, growing close to the edge of the water, and to these ropes were passed from the caps of the lower masts. The whole crew then set to work at the capstan, and hove at the ropes through a block till the ship careened over and lay gently on her side. That done, those who had training as carpenters prepared to mend the shot-rents in her side, while others, less accomplished, went to the forest with a few of the natives and felled trees which had been selected. Meanwhile, precautions against surprise were not neglected.

"We must hope that no one has been able to communicate the news of our coming here," said Sir Thomas, as he walked on the sands with Roger, for since the capture of the mine he had become very friendly with our hero. "But in case the tale has gone to Santiago, which is their main port farther

A Stranger comes Aboard

east, we must keep a guard at the mine. I give you the conduct of it, and you may take whatever natives you like, and doubt not that Tamba will accompany you. The fellow is like a dog. He follows you everywhere. But to return to the mine. You had better make your own arrangements there, and I think I would counsel you to despatch men into the forest, so as to have timely warning of an enemy's approach. Here we shall watch for their coming by sea, and my guards will be stationed on the point of the cliff."

And so for three weeks the work continued undisturbed. A fort was formed on the cliff, and there all the wounded and sick from the brigantine were sent to recuperate, while Roger and Philip, and the ever-faithful Tamba, went to the mine and passed their days in the forest. Then came the time for departure.

"All our rents are mended, and for the past three days we have been busily loading water and fruit on the ship," said Roger to Philip, as the two sat before a fire which blazed in front of one of the huts, for though the heat was not required, the smoke served to keep the myriad insects away. "Tomorrow we sail for the unknown, for this Terra Firma, this New Spain, the goal of our ambitions."

"And we sail not empty-handed, eh, Roger?" laughed his friend. "Why, already we have a king's ransom below our decks, and that in itself is a prize."

"Sufficient, in fact, to tempt others to follow our endeavour should we be forced to return now," agreed Roger. "'Tis strange that we English, who at home are professed friends of the Spaniards, though few feel much liking for them—and 'tis

Roger the Bold

whispered that the King's Majesty is not too well disposed toward the country—should out here be at daggers drawn, ready to rend one another, and to fall on one another's necks with violence when the opportunity offers. 'Tis passing strange."

"But the cause is not far to seek," said Philip. "The greed of gold, mayhap of new lands, makes us enemies. Spain covets all these Indies, and, like a dog with a bone, snarls over this fair land. But we will pick some of the finest parts, and, mark my words, should we return successful, then others will follow, others better armed, with bigger cannon, ready to wrest the Indies from Spain. Heigho! I shall feel sorry indeed when the moment comes to part with Cuba. 'Tis an enchanted land. But let us try this habit again. Tamba tells us that the natives commence to smoke when barely youths."

"Then I will have none of it," answered Roger, with a wry face. "To those born to the custom it may be well enough, but to me—ugh! my head swims and my stomach sickens when I make the attempt."

Philip, too, had had as little success, and after two attempts had given up all thought of tobacco. Nor was it to be wondered at, for in those days the habit was looked upon by Europeans who happened to be in the Indies as one fit only for savages. However, the two young fellows had plenty of other matters to occupy themselves with, for a careful watch had to be kept, and this was accomplished by cutting a new road through the forest to an elevated peak, the summit of which commanded the adjacent country. And from this, one or other of them, in the company of natives, kept a look-out throughout every day.

A Stranger comes Aboard

The remainder of their time was spent in the forest, shooting wild beasts and birds with their crossbows, and in gathering knowledge of the wild fruits and flowers which grew in profusion all round them. At last, however, this enjoyable time came to an end, and they marched to the sea once more. There the fort on the point was found to be abandoned, the ship upright, and wearing a coat of rough paint, while her only connection with the shore was a strong rope. All entered the solitary boat and went aboard. The rope was cast off, and the brigantine, catching the breeze, made for the open water.

"A fair wind is a fine omen," said Sir Thomas in his hearty voice, smacking Roger on the back. "The breeze comes from the east, and our course is due west. What could be more advantageous? We put out for the last part of our voyage with halé men, with natives who loathe the Spaniards, and who make up for our losses, and with a store of fresh water and provisions aboard."

"With gold in addition," Roger ventured to remind him.

"Ay, with abundance of gold. Now, Sir Giant, you will command one of the watches, and when we first sight this Terra Firma it will be your task to gather tidings of this strange city. Maybe this Tamba, who speaks Spanish, also has some few words of the language of the natives of these parts for which we sail. It is not impossible. For, consider: how came these men on the island of Cuba and elsewhere? Were they there some little while after the flood of which the Bible speaks? Some say so, while others hold that the nations of the earth come from a common stock, which slowly

Roger the Bold

increased, while many migrated. In course of time their languages have changed, and also their appearances. Climates and circumstances have brought the alteration, and may it not be that these same natives whom we have aboard are first cousins to these others on the Terra Firma, alike to them in looks, and perhaps in somewhat of their tongue?"

The commander of the brigantine was silent for a few minutes while he considered the question; for he was a naturally thoughtful man, and, in those days, a much-travelled one. Presently he turned to Roger again.

"You shall go ashore," he said, "and with you will go the golden plaque which we have treasured. Then, with the help of this Tamba, you will search for some of the natives, and make friends with them by means of gifts. Perhaps some will have been to this wonderful city which stands within a lake. Who knows? Perhaps we may come upon the very shores of the lake, for I hold that it must be within easy distance of the coast, or else how did this Fernando Cortes come to possess the plaque? Till we sight the land, you will command one of the watches."

Two mornings later, as Roger was preparing to call the relief, who would take his place on deck, a strange object in the distance caught his attention, and he called Peter Tamworth to him.

"A boat—a small boat," said the latter, with assurance bred of long service to the sea. "There is a sail too, but it hangs ragged, and the boat steers herself. Yes, she floats in a circle, for she cannot be said to sail, though her canvas catches the wind on occasion."

The two looked long and steadily at the strange

A Stranger comes Aboard

object, and soon Roger felt sure that Peter had made no mistake.

"A boat out here!" he said in astonishment—"in these seas which I thought to be deserted, for we have seen nothing but horizon these last two days, since we dropped the coast of Cuba."

"But Spaniards control these waters; do not forget that," was the answer. "Therefore it requires no wit to guess at the owners. 'Tis a Spanish boat—a derelict, maybe, dropped from some vessel, or broken from its moorings at Santiago."

"Then you think that no one is aboard?"

"As certainly as I guess that she's Spanish. Still, who can say, Master Roger, the lieutenant? There may be a crew of cut-throats aboard her, in which case we shall run them over with our prow and never miss them."

"But what if they are storm-beaten?" demanded Roger. "I even think that I see a form aboard. Wait till I have climbed the mast, for from there I shall get a finer view."

He ran along the deck, and clambered up to the trees, where he remained for a few minutes.

"As I thought," he said. "There is one solitary figure aboard, and he lies across the thwarts as if he were dead. We must succour him. Go you to Sir Thomas with the news."

An hour later, when the brigantine came up with the boat, those aboard the former saw that the derelict was of Spanish manufacture, and that a Spaniard lay in a heap, half on the thwarts and half in the bottom. His head was sunk on his breast, and he took no notice of the strangers.

"Lost at sea, and dead perhaps," said Sir

Roger the Bold

Thomas. "It shall not be said of us that we treated Spaniards badly; for did we not feed our prisoners in Cuba and release them ere we sailed? We will succour this poor fellow. Run us closer, master, and let two of the men be prepared to drop down into her."

A few minutes later they were running gently alongside the tiny boat, and, thanks to the care of the steersman, two of the sailors were able to drop into her. A rope was heaved to them, and in a little while the stranger was towing at the stern.

"Not dead, but far gone, it seems," was the report of one of the men. "There is not a scrap of food aboard, and only a wooden bowl to show that he had water, but now it is as dry as a bone."

"Then we will fashion a sling and pull him up," said Sir Thomas; "or, better, do you, Roger de Luce, lean well over the side, and others shall hold you; then those aboard the boat can pull alongside and hand the fellow up. Now, let us not bungle the matter; we will take the greater pains because he is a Spaniard."

It required but a little time to carry out the operation, and very soon the stranger lay under an awning on the deck, while Peter Tamworth knelt beside him.

"I warrant he has not been overlong at sea," he said, eyeing the man critically, "for his clothes are not oversoiled, and he is not so thin. Then, too, his lips are not swollen, as I have seen before in other cases. 'Twere well to be sure that he were no spy."

"Tush, man! Why think of such a thing?" demanded Sir Thomas, angrily. "Who would risk

A Stranger comes Aboard

almost certain death in such a manner? We might have sailed some leagues to north or south. We might so easily have lost him, or he us, to follow your reasoning. And if we had, could he live to reach the land?"

The argument seemed conclusive, and, moreover, though this Spaniard did not appear to be at the last extremity, he seemed to have lost his senses.

"This sun blazing on his head would be sufficient for that," said Sir Thomas. "The man is a derelict, and it matters not to us whether he is in extremes or but lately become unconscious; we will succour him all the same. Come, now, let an old campaigner give advice. Give him water first, but in little sips, and not much at that; later, he shall have his fill, when he is able to eat. Roger de Luce and the surgeon will look to him, while we see that the boat is hoisted. There was nothing else aboard?"

"Nothing," was the answer.

"And he has no papers about him?"

"I have searched," answered Roger. "His pockets are empty; there is nothing on him."

"Then he is deserving of our compassion. Let us deal with him as we would wish to be dealt with were we in like predicament. Let him have water, as I said, and later his fill of meat."

That evening the Spaniard was able to sit up, and even to struggle to his feet, but he was as yet too weak to give an account of himself. However, on the following morning Roger questioned him in the presence of the commander.

"Let us hear where you come from," he said kindly. "We discovered you in the middle of the ocean, far from land, and without food or water."

Roger the Bold

"Would I had died!" was the answer, as the man stared at Roger, astounded to find one aboard an English ship who spoke his language. "Would I had died! For it seems that I have fallen from the hands of one enemy into those of another."

"But why?" demanded Roger. "We are enemies to your countrymen, for the simple reason that they attacked us on the high seas; but to you—never! We have saved you from death, and, when the time comes, we will hand you back to your comrades."

"And to sure death," was the reply. "Listen, senor. I am deemed a traitor. It is thought that I have conspired against the Governor of Santiago, and my punishment was this——"

He stopped as if he were fatigued, and sipped at the vessel of water beside him.

"I was condemned to put to sea in an open boat," he said faintly, as if the memory of his trouble was too great for him. "I was taken aboard a galleon a week ago, and dropped into this boat. There I was left, with little food and water, with no chart, and no knowledge of the ways of the sea; and all around me, when the galleon went out of sight, was water. Oh, the awful horror of it!"

He shuddered, and buried his face in his hands. Then, regaining courage, he proceeded—

"I take Heaven to witness that I was no traitor and no conspirator. But what use is it to repine? A week ago I thought that death stared me in the face, and when a few days had gone I longed for the end to come. But one struggles even for the most miserable of lives, for existence is dear to us all. I steered the boat as well as I could, in what direction I knew not. Then my arm tired, my

A Stranger comes Aboard

strength failed, and the sun overpowered me. I knew no more till I found myself beneath this awning. And you will befriend me? Doubtless you are bound for England?"

There was silence on the deck, while the commander nodded to Roger.

"Did I not say so?" he asked, after a little while. "A spy would know that that was not our intention."

"Unless he acted a part," answered Roger, quietly. "That supposition is still open."

"Not to us," was the stern answer. "We will give the man full trust, or none at all. His tale is true on the face of it. But bid him continue, and ask him of this far country to which we are bound. Let him know that we are for the Terra Firma."

"We are bound for the west," said Roger. "We are in search of a city the plan of which was captured from a Spanish ship."

"Show it to me. Let me see it," demanded the Spaniard, eagerly. "If it is that plan of which I have heard, then indeed shall I be able to deal punishment to those who have ill-used me. Yes, and I can bring riches to those who have saved my life, to friends who should be enemies."

Roger translated the words to Sir Thomas, who at once ordered the plaque to be brought.

"What does he know?" he asked impatiently. "Let us hear what he has to say."

But no amount of questioning would induce the Spaniard to speak till the plaque had arrived. He took it in his hand, and gazed at it attentively, turning it over and over.

"'Tis the very one, the golden disc," he said,

Roger the Bold

"and now I can repay your kindness. Bid your commander tell me whether I may take service in the ranks. My name is Alvarez de Logas, a good Spanish name, and I swear to be true to all of this expedition."

He stared at Sir Thomas as Roger interpreted, attempting to read his answer.

"Tell him that for his help we will take him into our ranks," said the commander. "But he must make no error. His service must be true and honourable, for if he shows me or any a sign of faithlessness, he shall be shot at once. Those orders shall be published to all aboard."

"And they are just," agreed Alvarez. "Kill me if I prove untrue to my word. I swear to aid you, to take your side against my countrymen; for they cast me out. They sent me to a horrible death, and they are no longer my people. I become an Englishman from this moment, and I will obey all orders. But let me speak of this disc, this golden plaque, with the sun's image on one side, and a plan on the reverse. It is a drawing of——"

Sir Thomas, Peter Tamworth, and many of the gentlemen adventurers crowded nearer as Roger interpreted word for word, and threatened to fall upon the man.

"Yes, yes," exclaimed the commander, impatiently. "Concerns what place? Come! The name without further dallying."

"It gives the outline of the great city of Mexico, on the Terra Firma, but lately discovered by Fernando Cortes."

"Mexico! Mexico!" They repeated the word as if it were some strange charm.

A Stranger comes Aboard

"Mexico, the great city built within the borders of a lake, the home of vast riches," said Alvarez. "This plan marks the treasury, and, it is said, was kept secret by Fernando. It is also said that he sent the relic to Ferdinand of Spain, but that it was captured by the English. Then came news, so report says, that the ambassador from our country sent word of an intended sailing, and that a ship arrived at Cuba a week after the fight in which you beat my countrymen, those who were my comrades, but who now are enemies. But this Fernando had heard the tale of the capture, and for that reason a watch was set on the narrow seas about the island of Cuba, and fast vessels stationed there. For England is not wanted here. None of your countrymen are desired, and least of all those who have the golden plaque; for then, were this Mexico reached, and the natives friendly, this treasure, which we of Spain desired, might fall to your lot, for the plaque holds the secret. Yes, it holds the secret, for in the plan is given the whereabouts of the treasury, and none else know of its position save the Mexicans themselves, and Fernando Cortes. He, it is said, was told by some Indian woman, who is skilled in these pictures. But all the others are ignorant."

"And this city?" demanded Sir Thomas, breathlessly. "Where does it lie, and who commands it?"

"'Tis directly west of Yucatan. Make the northern point of that, and then proceed without change of course. As for the commander. The tale came to us at Cuba that Montezuma was king till a little while ago, and that Fernando lodged in the city itself, and held the king as hostage. But he had few men, and was too weak to do more. Also

Roger the Bold

the Mexicans were becoming more and more unfriendly. They wore a threatening look, and it appeared as though this Cortes would be driven out at any time. Whether that has happened I do not know, but I can say that at that time no treasure had come to his hand. This plaque was stolen, I believe, while the other riches were gifts from King Montezuma. Bear me to this part of the Terra Firma, and I promise to aid you in your search for the wealth of Mexico."

"And to hold news of our arrival from your late comrades?" demanded Roger, sternly. "Swear it!"

"I do, most solemnly. I take oath to serve you loyally. Let death be my reward if I fail."

There was silence for a little while, and then the meeting broke up, Sir Thomas trudging the deck in a brown study, while Phil and Roger retired to a favourite spot and sat upon the rail.

"What think you of the tale?" asked our hero presently. "'Tis a cruel thing to send a countryman adrift upon the sea."

"And worse still out in these parts," answered Philip; "for might it not have happened that this boat would drift to some desert island, or, worse, to some island inhabited by unfriendly natives—poor fellows who have already seen and felt the cruelty of the Spaniards. 'Twas a wicked act."

"Then, why send him with food and water?"

For a little while Philip sat looking at his friend, drumming his heels on the deck, while Roger lolled with half-closed eyes.

"Why prolong his agony?" he asked. "Why give him the means to live when death was allotted to him?"

A Stranger comes Aboard

"Because——. Why, you don't think——?"

"I think nothing," was Roger's curt answer. "I loll upon the deck, enjoying the sun and the motion of the boat, and I think nothing of importance. But I do not sleep, and I watch, or hope to, Philip."

"Then you suspect?"

"Nothing. I have heard the tale, and as I let the points run through my mind, I ask if it appears a natural one, whether it was possible that it happened so. Then I think of what might be gained by a clever ruse, played by a bold and adventurous man. Have we not all heard that those who come to these Indies from Old Spain are the adventurous ones, the men who cannot live quietly at home? And do we not all know the greed for gold, for we ourselves have it? Then, if a man played such a part, and made new friends——"

Philip sat up suddenly. "I never thought of that," he said breathlessly. "If a bold man had purposely sailed from the land, and had lain in wait for us, he could have pretended to be senseless. He could have kept a store of food and drink aboard till we hove in sight, and since our course was to the west, to this Terra Firma, to this New Spain, and all in Cuba knew it, the chances of falling in with us were not so unlikely. Then, under the cover of friendship, and while protesting hatred for these Spaniards, a man might snatch this prize, might use it for his own purposes."

"Or win the reward which has doubtless been offered for it. Yes, Philip, that is how I have thought of the matter; and yet I do not like to suspect this man. It seems unkind and uncharitable.

Roger the Bold

Still, my mind is not easy, and I shall watch. More than that, I shall ask Tamba to do the same. But not a word to the others, for were we to speak, and then prove to be wrong, as seems very likely to be the case, then we should earn the enmity of Alvarez, and have few thanks from Sir Thomas for our pains."

They chatted for a little while, and then strolled away.

"If all is well there will be no suspicion aroused," said Roger. "But if otherwise, this Alvarez will be on the watch. He knows me, for I have acted as interpreter, and he will naturally think that if any one should be suspicious of his tale, I shall be that one. So do not let us be seen with our heads together too often."

Accordingly the two took care to be seldom together, while Roger kept out of the way of Alvarez as much as possible. When he happened to meet him, which was often on such a small vessel, he chatted in a friendly manner, for he determined that nothing on his part should lead the Spaniard to think that he had doubts. And very soon he had his reward; for when the first week had passed Alvarez's manner changed. He saw that all aboard were frank and open with him, and prepared to accept him as a friend, and he lost the air of caution, the watchful manner which he had borne when first he was lifted aboard. Then he joined the men at their meals, and Roger noticed that he listened to their chatter with a crafty smile. He even attempted English, with wonderful success, so much so that when three weeks had passed, and the northern point of Yucatan had been weathered, he could almost understand when spoken to, while his

A Stranger comes Aboard

attempts at a response were more than creditable. A week later land was sighted, and preparations made to disembark.

"You will go ashore with Tamba," said Sir Thomas to Roger, "and it would be as well to take this Spaniard with you. Methinks that he has seen the coast hereabouts, for I have watched him leaning over the rail with his eyes on the land. Ask him the question."

"Our leader thinks that you may have been here before, and failed to tell us," said Roger, attracting Alvarez's attention by a touch on the shoulder, and noticing with what a start he listened to him. "Is this the case? Have you been a voyage to this Terra Firma?"

"Never before," was the answer, though Roger could see that he was ill at ease. He was taken unawares, and for a moment had forgotten his fine acting. "These lands are strange to me, but I have listened to tales of them, and I wondered whether I could tell from the appearance of yonder coast to what part we have come. It must be somewhere in the neighbourhood of Vera Cruz, the town which Fernando Cortes was founding when news last came from him."

"Then we will search for it," said Roger. "The commander's orders are that you and I go ashore and search for natives, to give us the direction."

Was there a faint gleam of triumph in the Spaniard's eyes as he heard the news? Roger wondered, and grew more suspicious. Then he turned away, and made preparations for the landing. A few hours later the brigantine brought up within a few hundred yards of a sandy shore, and the boat

Roger the Bold

was lowered. A dozen armed men clambered into it, while Roger and Tamba took their places in the stern, both armed with crossbows and with sword and dagger, for our hero had taken pains to teach the native the use of these weapons. Under one arm, secured in a bag which was slung to his shoulder, he carried the precious golden disc. A minute later Alvarez scrambled down to the boat and took his place beside him.

"Let us pray for success, senor," he said blandly. "Let us hope that natives will be there who can tell us the way to Mexico. The name will be sufficient. Speak it, and if they have heard of the place they will give us the direction."

"Shove off!" shouted the sailor at the rudder, and the boat was at once pushed from the side of the brigantine. A little later her keel slid gently on to the sand, and all sprang into the water and waded ashore. As at the port in Cuba, there were trees here, and Roger at once searched for an inlet amongst them.

"There is one over there," he said, pointing to the right, and speaking in Spanish. "We will go that way and try our fortune. No use to attempt to penetrate the heart of the forest, for natives are not likely to be found there."

"And we shall go alone, senor?" asked the Spaniard, with some trace of anxiety.

"With Tamba," answered Roger. "Lead us, Alvarez, for doubtless you are more used to these forests than are we."

There was a vague, questioning look in the eyes of the Spaniard. His brow was furrowed, and Roger could see that he was thinking. But the man turned

A Stranger comes Aboard

on his heel a moment later, and trudged off across the sand, while Roger and Tamba fell in behind, a quick glance passing between them. And in this order they reached the break in the trees and entered the shadow of the forest. Their road took them along the side of a stream, and though they searched for traces of natives, none were to be found. The forest trees came closer, while the ground they traversed became more difficult. They clambered over rocks and fallen trunks, and sometimes were compelled to wade along in the stream.

"We are doomed to disappointment, senor," said the Spaniard, halting at last and wiping the perspiration from his brow. "There are no natives here, and never have been. We waste our breath and our strength, and we run the risk of fever. See how damp the soil is, and how huge the trees. Let us return, and try a path elsewhere."

The request was reasonable, and Roger gladly assented to it. But it happened that at that point the river had narrowed, and chanced to run through a belt of rock, a strip which cropped up in the centre of the forest. Tree trunks grew close on either side, and to return in the same order would have needed an effort; Alvarez would have had to squeeze past our hero, or push his way through the undergrowth.

"Then we will turn and walk as we are till the path widens," said Roger, for one small moment forgetting his caution. And what wonder! It wanted an older man than he, one experienced in life, who had met men of every sort, and had learned to trust but little, to keep up such suspicions. This Spaniard had done nothing to cause trouble. Roger

Roger the Bold

was forced to confess that not once had the details of his story broken down. He had never contradicted himself, though once or twice, when off his guard, his answers had been a little doubtful. Why distrust him? Let him prove his honest intentions.

It was a fatal mistake ; but who can set old heads on young shoulders? Roger failed to notice the gleam which came to the Spaniard's eye, failed to watch the triumph written on his face. He turned, and followed Tamba along the rocky bed. There was a movement behind him as Alvarez made ready to follow. Then something pulled gently at our hero's shoulder, a dagger blade cut the strap which secured the golden plaque, while a second movement plunged the blade deep in Roger's shoulder. Not till then had there been a sound. Now, however, there was a shout of astonishment, a sharp cry of pain, and when Tamba turned towards the young Englishman, whom he had learned to look to as his master, Roger lay bleeding in the water, while the figure of the Spaniard was just disappearing amongst the trees of the forest.

CHAPTER VII

The Hand of the Traitor

ALVAREZ DE LOGAS, the frank and friendly Spaniard, had proved false, had acted worse than dishonourably, for he had stolen the confidence of the crew of the brigantine, and the golden disc at the same time. He was a traitor to his new comrades, and a murderer at heart, for he had struck Roger with his dagger.

“Where am I? What has happened to me, and why are we here in the forest?” asked our hero three days later, when he opened his eyes for the first time since he had received the treacherous stroke. “Is that you, Tamba? Tell me what has happened. I have been dreaming. I thought that we had come to this New Spain, to Terra Firma, and that you and I and——”

He suddenly broke off with a feeble groan, while the native knelt beside him, taking his hand to comfort him.

“I do not understand, my lord,” he said. “You speak your own tongue, and forget that I cannot. What are the questions?”

Roger repeated them feebly, while he closed his eyes, for even there the rays of the sun were trying. But Tamba was a discerning nurse, and at once

Roger the Bold

placed a screen of huge leaves, secured to a stake, between the rays and Roger's eyes.

"You were hurt," he whispered. "The treacherous Spaniard proved to be all that you suspected, and he snatched his opportunity. He is gone, and three days have passed since I saw the last of him."

"And he has stolen the golden disc? Then follow! Do not lose another instant. Follow at once, and pursue him till you come up with him. The disc was entrusted to my care, and what am I to say when we return to the brigantine?"

In his dismay he leaned upon his elbow, only to sink again to the soft bed of dried leaves with which the native had provided him, while the latter raised his eyes at the mention of the brigantine.

"I would chase him to the end of the land were I able to do so, master," he said. "But what then would have happened to you? You were feeble. You lay senseless in the water, and the blood poured from your wound. I thought of running after this Alvarez. Then I thought of you, and I said to myself that your life was more valuable to me and to the English than was this disc. I stayed, therefore, and Alvarez is gone. But not for good. Master, when you are strong we shall come up with him, and then——"

Even beneath the brown skin of the native there could be seen a tinge of red colour as the blood rose to his forehead and cheeks, called there by his hatred and indignation. For Tamba was one of those simple fellows, a child of the Cuban forest, with few wants, and few likes and dislikes. His was a faithful nature, which even the cruel whip of the Spanish overseer had been unable to destroy, and

The Hand of the Traitor

where he had placed his faith he kept it. Roger was more than his friend and master, and to see him struck down was an agony to Tamba. Why, then, should he chase after a Spaniard while his lord bled slowly to death? He put aside the idea without a second thought, and on that fatal day promptly set to work to do what was possible. Taking Roger in his arms, he dragged him along the stream to the most suitable open spot, and there he placed him on a soft piece of turf, while he himself sought for roots and herbs, and for something with which to dress the wound. A piece of Roger's clothing had sufficed for the last, and Tamba had been able to stop the bleeding. Then he went to the shore in search of the English soldiers. But they were nowhere to be seen, though the brigantine lay in the offing, her canvas at full stretch, beating out to sea, two Spanish vessels being in close chase of her. It was a terrible blow, and the native hardly knew how to break the news to Roger.

"You were hurt," he ventured gently. "And I could not pursue the traitor while you lay in the stream. You would have been smothered by the water had the bleeding not killed you. So I brought you here, and I built a hut over you while you lay insensible. I am thankful that you are now able to speak."

Roger opened his eyes and looked round in amazement, and now that the screen of leaves had been placed between him and the sun he could easily see. His eyes blinked at the unaccustomed light, but for all that he could make out that he lay on a comfortable bed, that a hut constructed of poles cut from the forest, and of broad leaves as thatch,

Roger the Bold

covered him, while a cool breeze swept in through the open sides. There, too, was the stream which he had lately traversed, and all about him, on every side, the virgin forest, huge trunks with towering foliage, giant creepers which crept from branch to branch and bridged the spaces, and thousands of gaudy flowers. The air, too, seemed to be full of the twitter of birds which flitted here and there. Then his eye went to the spot through which they had come, and he remembered the sea, the brigantine, and his comrades.

"Where are they?" he demanded suddenly, sitting up with another start. "How is it, if I have been here three days, that they are not with me, that our apothecary has not attended, that Sir Thomas has not been to hear my news? But perhaps they came while I lay senseless or asleep, for I think I must have been unconscious. I have dreamed one long dream. And, Tamba——"

The native was beside him at once, holding his hand, and lifting a gourd of water to his lips.

"Tamba, I dreamed that this Alvarez had killed me, and that he had made for Mexico, and had taken the treasure. But tell me of my comrades. Perhaps they thought it better that I should rest here. Has Philip been to see me?"

"He is not here. None are within call, for the brigantine sailed when this traitor struck his blow."

The news was stunning. Roger opened his mouth in amazement, and lay there aghast.

"The brigantine gone without us. They would never desert their friends! There must be some mistake. They have coasted along, and will return."

The Hand of the Traitor

He looked at Tamba eagerly, as if fearful to hear his answer.

"They went three days ago, as I have said, my lord," said the native. "When I had tended to you and returned to the shore the ship was out on the horizon, and two Spaniards were in chase of her. She has not appeared since, though I have been to look. But one of the Spaniards has returned, and yesterday she sent men ashore to search. But they failed to come this way, and returned to their vessel. We are safe for the moment."

"But what is to become of us? We are stranded in an unknown land. We are alone, without friends, and who knows how many enemies about us? Perhaps even this Alvarez will return with his friends and murder us."

"He has gone for good," was the reassuring answer. "I followed his track when you were well enough to be left, and it goes straight on for leagues. He fled without turning, never dreaming that the ship would leave us here. But we shall live through this trial, my lord. This coast is not far from the part for which we sailed—of that I feel sure; for would this Alvarez have run just here had the distance been over great? What he can do, we can also."

"And will!" exclaimed Roger, with more strength and energy than he had hitherto displayed. "We also will make for Mexico, and do our best to treat with Montezuma, or, rather, with his successor. What fun if Peter and the others followed us to find the matter all arranged! How Peter would bridle! How his face and nose would shine! But I must not fly too far. I have yet to get well. What is the nature of the injury, Tamba?"

Roger the Bold

“A simple dagger wound, just beneath the shoulder blade, which penetrated the lung, and nearly killed because of the bleeding. My lord lay there and coughed for hours, till I thought that he would die. Then the blood ceased to come from his lips, and he grew better. To-day you have spoken for the first time.”

“And from this moment I proceed to get strong and well, for I cannot bear to lie here while my comrades are gone. Nor can I stay much longer and think that Alvarez has possession of the golden disc. By his own words—honest words, I feel sure—this disc keeps the secret of the treasure of the Mexicans. And we are bound to Mexico with the thought of taking some of those riches from the Spaniards before all are gone. Then there is no time to lose. I must grow strong, and follow, and then, Tamba, should I see this Alvarez, I swear to punish him for this treachery, not because I have suffered a wound, but because all aboard the brigantine will have suffered. He shall die, and I will kill him.”

There was an ugly gleam in the sick youth's eye—a gleam which his friends had seen there before when the brigantine had laid herself aboard the Spanish galleon. Roger was not vindictive, nor even pugnacious, but a wrong was a wrong, and treachery was the worst of offences. As to the riches in Mexico, it never occurred to our hero to think what right he and his comrades had to them. The expedition was formed, as many were to be in later days, to obtain gold, to wrest it from the Spaniards or from the natives, and preferably from the former, for it is easier to stand aside and watch

The Hand of the Traitor

while one man gathers gold than to collect it one's self. And also, the prize to be obtained is then greater. Nowadays such an expedition would be inexcusable; but then it was different. It was common for nations who were friendly in home waters to come to blows when far away, and these expeditions for the gathering of gold were looked upon as legitimate, a fair adventure, not as open piracy, as we should now consider them to be. However, Roger need not be blamed if he gave little thought to the matter, considering his age; and, besides, he had other things to occupy his mind. His thoughts, in fact, were busy with Álvarez, while he blamed himself time and again because he had not preserved more caution.

"I was a fool," he thought, "to turn my back even for a second, and, of course, the fellow took advantage of the fact. But how he hoodwinked us all! Even I could never prove that he was a rogue. But now one can see through the whole matter. He was selected, for what reason I dare not say, nor why a big galleon was not sent—but he came out in a tiny boat, and sailed from Cuba towards the west. No doubt he was on the look out for us, and therefore saw us before we caught sight of him. What was easier, then, than to tear the sail, to disarrange the boat, and to throw food and water overboard as soon as he was sure that he was discovered? And I have my suspicions that he could talk something of our language, for he progressed amazingly. In any case, he played the part well, and we were deceived. And this is the result!"

Roger sat up and surveyed himself and his long legs in dismay. It was the very first time that he

Roger the Bold

had ever been laid up, and the experience was new to him. He felt strangely weak, and trembled after the slightest exertion. But he could think, if he could not move, and he spent his time in watching Tamba, and in wondering how this adventure would terminate. Nor had he missed the mark by much when he spoke of the Spaniard; for a clever trick had been successfully played upon the leader of the English. It happened that not far from the mine in Cuba on the very day on which it was captured was a Spaniard, this same Alvarez, and his quick ears detected the noise of firing. That led him to investigate during the following night, for he, too, had heard of the presence of an English ship on the coast. He had found the mine in the hands of the enemy, and he had debated what he ought to do. If he left for the nearest Spanish post the ship would be gone, while if he stayed she would go when her damages were repaired. Then he thought of the disc, for which a big reward had been offered, and, being an adventurous fellow, and one, moreover, accustomed to Englishmen, for he had once attended an ambassador at the court of St. James, he determined to seek for the reward himself. He knew of a boat along the coast, and spent a few days in fetching her. Then he despatched a native to his comrades, telling them of his discovery, timing its arrival so that none could interfere.

“None can save the situation but myself,” he wrote. “But I have faith in English humanity, and I will risk the attempt. If successful, I will claim the reward of Fernando Cortes.”

The reader will have seen that Alvarez had made no mistake. No Englishman worthy of the name

The Hand of the Traitor

would have done ought else than succour a derelict man, and the Spaniard, having a specious story, was able to ingratiate himself. With the result that the disc was gone, and our hero, the giant crossbowman and lieutenant, lay fretting in the forest, chained by stronger links than were ever worn by a prisoner.

A week later Roger was able to rise, while within ten days he could walk. Then, too, the wound was healed, thanks to the attention of Tamba. Meanwhile, nothing had been seen of the brigantine.

"You say that you have seen the Spaniard in the offing, and nearer in once or twice," said Roger, thoughtfully, as he and the native crouched over the fire which burned at the foot of one of the trees. "Then I fear that the coast is being patrolled, and that our friends are unable to return. Did you hear firing on that day when Alvarez struck me?"

"None. Not a gun, my lord. I saw the brigantine away at sea, and two galleons after her; but there was no fighting."

"Then Sir Thomas practised the old ruse," said Roger. "He doubled back at night, and I have little doubt sailed towards the land. But finding it patrolled, he sheered off again, and sailed right away, with the intention of returning. He will do that if he is allowed to, and in case we are gone, we will place a mark or a letter on the shore. Let us wait for three weeks, and then we will march. Now tell me of these natives you have seen."

Tamba had, in fact, seen some strange natives on the far side of the forest, and hastened to speak of them.

"They are tall, well clothed, and have straight black hair, such as I have," he said. "They were in

Roger the Bold

a body, some forty strong, and I think that they were hunting. But I did not approach nearer, for the forest goes very far, and it was past noon."

"Then let us make an expedition there when we have put our mark up on the shore," said Roger. "We will take three days over it, and return here again. It will be a good chance for me to test my strength."

On the following morning they went down to the beach, and there, having stripped a large piece of bark from a tree, Roger, who had learned to write—a very unusual accomplishment in those days—cut letters upon it. "We are well, and await your return," he said. "We are going into the country for three days from this, and shall be back in case you come."

"There!" he added, showing it to Tamba. "There is no date, for the simple reason that I don't know what month it is, nor the day of the month; but if they come they can, and will, wait for three days. Now we will go. Let us take our crossbow and our other weapons, for these natives may prove unfriendly. Food we can get on the way, for the forest will be full of fruit."

"In the open spaces there is plenty, but not in the depths of the jungle," answered Tamba. "Then there are animals. I have seen deer in the clearings, snakes, and other beasts that I do not know. We are secure from starvation, while water is plentiful."

"Then we can set out with a light heart. Now, you give the lead, only recollect that the direction is almost due north."

Tamba could have found his way through the forest almost blindfolded, so accustomed was he to

The Hand of the Traitor

the work, and Roger soon found him invaluable ; for our hero was not yet so strong that he could march all day, struggling through the underwood, and then search for his evening meal. In fact, he had to take frequent rests, while Tamba went off into the forest, always with the knowledge that he could find his master with the greatest ease. It was on one of these occasions, when Roger lay full length in the shade, fanning himself with a leaf, that a beautiful creature, a deer of some species, leaped into the natural clearing on the edge of which Roger lay, and paused there, listening to the crash as Tamba pushed his way through the underwood. It was a fine opportunity, and for the first time for many a day Roger tried his hand with his favourite weapon. His hand sought the crossbow slowly and silently, and a shaft was fitted in a twinkling. But even the creak of the cord as the bow was sprung back was sufficient to alarm this wild creature. It lifted its head suspiciously, sniffed the air, and, catching sight of the strange figure at the base of the tree, bounded away in the opposite direction. Roger sat up suddenly and brought the bow to his shoulder. He took a rapid aim, and fired just as the deer was disappearing. Then he gave vent to a shout of triumph, which brought Tamba racing back to him.

“A meal of flesh is more acceptable than one of fruit ; at least it is so to me,” said Roger, joyously. “Now, Tamba, set to work with me, and we will skin the beast, and cut him into quarters. But, tell me, how much farther have we to march before we come to the open country ?”

“About six leagues. Three hours will take us there, my lord.”

Roger the Bold

“Then we will push on as soon as the beast is quartered, and will carry the joints. To-night we will rest and feast, and to-morrow we will march into the open lands.”

Now that he was recovering, and feeling stronger and better every day, his heart was as light as a boy's, and he had long ago ceased to fret about the loss of his comrades.

“We shall meet them again sooner or later,” he said to Tamba, “and no amount of worrying will bring them to us earlier. Let us be happy and contented, and make the most of this experience. What would those at home give to see such forests, and to live such a life? They have no idea that these things exist, no thought of such trees and such flowers and fruit.”

The life was, indeed, an enchanting one, and Roger revelled in it. No walls surrounded him, and he slept in no stuffy cabin; indeed, had he now returned to the brigantine he would have found it difficult to bear the closeness and heat of the 'tween decks, and would have felt partly smothered, just as a campaigner does when for the first time for many a month he finds a roof above his head, even if it be only a canvas tent. Then the beauty of the herbage, the bright sun, and the dazzling flowers and butterflies delighted him, while the meals out-of-doors, when, if there was meat, it was cooked over a blazing wood fire, were a source of real pleasure. Tamba and Roger would lounge on such occasions and watch the steaks seething and spluttering, till the faithful native would pronounce them done to a turn. He would take the wooden spit and thrust it into the ground at their feet, and would sit again,

The Hand of the Traitor

and wait for his master to commence. Then, the meal finished, he would look at Roger as if to ask his permission, and then would produce his bag, and presently would be puffing at his tobacco. It was all so new, so entrancing, that Roger felt the days pass as if in a dream. However, after a sumptuous meal on that evening, they turned into their beds, consisting of a few leaves gathered from the trees, and awoke on the following morning to find themselves bivouacked on the fringe of the forest, while to the north of them was open land, a rolling stretch of green, broken in the far distance by some rugged mountainous ranges, while far inland the land seemed to continue in a dead, yellow flat, devoid of all vegetation.

“We must go with care,” said Tamba, as the two ate their meal within the screen of the trees. “That is why I lit the fire here this morning, for otherwise the smoke would be seen. I have watched for an hour, and have not been able to find these natives of whom I spoke. But I have discovered the sea; we are within a few leagues of it, and must have advanced very near to it.”

He took Roger to a slight eminence, from which he could see the ocean, sparkling in the sun, and a ship upon it.

“Spanish,” said Roger, with decision; “and a galleon. Is that the one which you say is patrolling the coast?”

“Who can say, master? All ships are the same to me, except in size. But I think it is the same. Her duty seems to be to sail up and down and keep your friends away.”

“So that we need not expect them in three days,

Roger the Bold

nor in thirty, so long as the weather lasts. Then I shall take longer over this expedition than I had intended, and we will see who these natives were. Let us take a joint from the deer and push on."

They were soon on their way, Tamba having selected a dip in the land which promised to give them shelter. Overhead a grilling sun sailed in the sky, while all around was delightful green, freshened by some recent rains. Deer occasionally looked at the intruders with curiosity, bounding off long before they could get close enough for a shot.

"They are wild, and yet their presence here seems to tell us that no one else is about," said Roger. "What do you say?"

"That we are the only ones in this part. I think that those natives whom I saw must have been a hunting party in search of deer, for they were widely separated, probably for the purpose of driving the beasts to a common centre. We can push on, therefore, without fear of being seen, though it will be wise to keep our eyes open."

"In case of surprise," added Roger. "Yes; for it has suddenly occurred to me that if Fernando Cortes has been here before, he and his men will have earned the hatred of some, at least, of the natives."

"Of all!" exclaimed Tamba, passionately. "They come with their guns and their horses, and they give fair promises. They speak of friendly treaties and of their religion; but behind it all is greed for gold."

"It is their cruel way," answered Roger. "But to return to what I was saying—they will have surely earned the hatred of some, and were they

The Hand of the Traitor

to go alone as we, they would do so in terror of their lives."

"That is so," admitted Tamba. "In my country, far off in the forests and in the interior, a Spaniard dared not go; for he knew that a cruel death awaited him. Yes, we had become cruel in our turn, though we had formerly been quiet and peaceful. We were driven to desperation, or rather to despair."

"Some here may be desperate. They may see us, and then they will think that I am a Spaniard."

Roger saw Tamba shrink at the idea. His face went pale, even beneath the dusk, while he looked at his master with frightened eyes.

"You could say that you were not Spanish, my lord. You would tell them that you belong to England."

"What did you know about England?" asked Roger, calmly. "Nothing. Then, how will these natives? But I am imagining a difficulty. Let us push on, and trust to good fortune."

That night found the two on the edge of the broad plain which they had traversed, and approaching the range of mountains, which they could now see were broken into many chains, and into separate pinnacles. They looked for a suitable bivouac, and selecting a huge overhanging rock, which promised to keep the heavy dew away, they lit their fire and ate their meal. Three hours later, while they slept, for they were both worn out by a long day's march, a hundred dark figures surrounded them, and skilful fingers drew their weapons away. Then they were pounced upon, beaten heavily, and dragged away into the darkness.

Roger the Bold

A bandage was tied firmly round their eyes, so that they could see nothing, and their limbs secured with soft cords. Then Roger felt himself lifted on to the shoulders of four tall men—at least, he thought that they were tall—and was carried off at a pace which must have taxed the strength of his bearers. Indeed, he heard their heavy breathing, and remarks which he thought referred to his length and weight.

“Prisoners,” he thought, with a shudder. “These fellows will do as I said, and take me for a Spaniard. I can expect little mercy from them, for if we are in the neighbourhood of Mexico many of the inhabitants will have been killed. But there is no use in bothering. As well prepare for the worst, and rest, so as to be fresh to bear what comes on the morrow.”

With this philosophic determination, he lay flat on the palanquin on which he had been thrown, and presently, in spite of his dread of the future, fell fast asleep; for the bandage about his eyes seemed to make him drowsy. And, then, he was as yet not fully recovered from his wound, and from the weakness consequent therefrom, and the march had been long and fatiguing. How long he slept he never knew, but he was awakened by a blast of cold air, which fanned his face, and by a movement of his bearers. They lowered him to the ground, not roughly, or as if they desired to harm him, but with every care, as if he were some person of importance. Then one of them removed the bandage, while the others stood him upon his feet. It was day; the dawn had broken but a few minutes before, and the crest of the sun was just risen over a mountain range. A cry escaped from

The Hand of the Traitor

Roger—a cry of amazement ; for down below him, at the end of the long straggling track which led down from the pass over which the party had been travelling, was a huge lake, nestling amongst broken mountain chains which did not run to its shores, but which stood back from them, giving the lake ample space. And attached to this lake was another, to the right and a little nearer, while at different points along the shores of both were towns, huge clusters of houses, with towers as high as St. Paul's in London, which he knew so well, towers which glistened and sparkled in the sun. But that was not all. The rugged mountain track descended to the plain in which lay the lakes, and crossed it direct to a viaduct, a straight line some two leagues in length, which pushed its granite walls out into the larger lake, to a huge city, standing white in the sun, and showing a hundred and more towers. Other viaducts cut off from it here and there, while he could see dots moving on the water. What a scene! Who could paint it? For the walls of the houses reflected the rays, while a dazzling light played upon the sides of the numerous towers, and upon their summits. But all was not white, for on nearly every flat roof the red and blue and dazzling pink of gorgeous flowers was given back, while gardens lay on either side of this lake city, seeming, as was actually the fact, to float on the water. In a flash it came to Roger's mind that this city, those viaducts, and those tiny boats were true to the plan which was engraved on the golden disc, now in the possession of Alvarez. The scene was stupendous. The wonder of it took his breath away, while he was amazed at the

Roger the Bold

thought that he was so soon within sight of the goal for which the brigantine had sailed.

“Mexico! Mexico!” he almost shouted. “The city for which we were bound.”

There was no answer. For a few minutes the natives allowed him to feast his eyes upon the sight. Then they put the bandage about his head again, and lifted him on to the litter. He was raised on to their shoulders, and they set off at a run down the slope. Presently they were crossing the viaduct, and when at length Roger was permitted to look again, he found that his bonds were being removed, and that he and Tamba sat side by side in an enormous wooden cage, placed in the centre of a square of huge dimensions, and close alongside another cage of similar arrangement, in which were some two hundred other prisoners.

What would have been his feelings had he known that he was in the heart of the city of Mexico, the fairest city of those times, the fairest city that has ever been, and that this cage in which he found himself was in the courtyard of the chief temple, a prison kept for the purpose of holding captives destined for the sacrifice. Yes; that was the custom of the Mexicans. They practised human sacrifice, as many a Spaniard was to know to his cost, and they kept ready at hand a number of wretched prisoners who were doomed to end their lives on the summit of the greatest temple.

When Roger learned the news the terror of it almost unmanned him, and he sank helpless upon his knees.

CHAPTER VIII

A City by the Water

FOR many weeks Roger de Luce had longed to see the city of Mexico, though it was a much shorter time since he had learned that that was the name of the place depicted upon the golden disc which had come into Peter Tamworth's hands. He had looked forward to beholding this quaint place, erected in the middle of a lake, surrounded, in fact, by water, and approached by one or more causeways. He had never dreamed that his ambition would so soon be gratified, nor was he so vastly pleased now that he had come to this spot, reputed to hold a store of treasure. Indeed, there are few who could look upon the prospects which now faced him with a cheerful face, for it was not long before he learned that the solid wooden bars of his cage were wont to hold captives—captives kept for the day of sacrifice. The thought was horrible, but the fact was true, for daily men were extracted from the other cage, and taken to the summit of the temple.

Let us leave our friend Roger in this predicament for a little while, discussing the position with his faithful Tamba, while we ascertain the movements of that gallant and astute leader known as

Roger the Bold

Fernando Cortes, and the reasons and objects which had brought him to this Terra Firma.

The reader will recollect that mention has been made of the voyages of discovery made by the Portuguese, mostly to Africa, voyages which taught the Regent of the country that there were islands such as Madeira and the Canaries, and which, if they did nothing else, brought a few slaves back to the shores of Portugal. Indeed, the first success of these expeditions led to a ghastly human traffic which accounted in later years for an importation of some thousand slaves per annum. But the Portuguese were not the first to display some curiosity in outside conditions, to investigate other parts, for the voyages accomplished by them, and those of Columbus, were merely links in a long chain of adventurous enterprises by sea which commenced centuries before, and have not ceased even at this date. Indeed, the East, the Far East, had been known of for very many years, while the Phœnicians, the Greeks, and the Carthaginians had sent their vessels out till the coasts of Southern Europe and Asia were known, as well as the northern coast of Africa. After these heroes came the Roman Empire, and we have little, if any, more information of discoveries till the beginning of the twelfth century, when there was renewed activity amongst the maritime peoples. In fact, the twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries constitute what is known as the "age of discovery," and of these the fifteenth century, with the earlier portion of the following one, was certainly the most productive of discoveries. And it is a curious coincidence that while men's minds were turned to foreign parts, to the

A City by the Water

effort to obtain knowledge of foreign peoples and affairs, there should have been a revival in other matters. The arts and sciences made headway during these centuries, while religious feeling revived, and enormous exertions were made to Christianize the heathen. In fact, Christianity was widely spread by the end of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, while a bitter war was being waged against the Saracens, who dominated Africa and the Mediterranean, keeping Genoa and Venice in check, while their armies conquered Spain, and even invaded France. But the energies of these intrepid warriors were not confined to war alone, for they sought for commerce, and there is little doubt but that they were acquainted with the Red Sea, with the east coast of Africa as far as Madagascar, and with much of the west coast of the same continent. But their knowledge was obtained for the most part not by voyages, but by overland routes, so that the interior, perhaps, rather than the coast-line was known.

In course of time these Saracens were beaten back by the tide of Christian chivalry, and then we find the Genoese prospecting voyages, in which they explored the Atlantic border of Africa, and wondered whether a passage existed to the due west by means of which they could reach India, the Far East.

And now we come to that period, extending over some sixty years, during which the Portuguese sent expeditions south along the west coast of Africa. These voyages, at first productive of only a few slaves, and later of a huge traffic in these unhappy victims of their raids, finally ended in the wonderful

Roger the Bold

achievement of Bartolomeo Diaz, who rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1485. Ten years later the intrepid Vasco de Gama doubled this cape, and sailed along the eastern coast of Africa to Durban, and from there to India itself, thus proving the existence of the huge continent of Africa, and the possibility of a passage to the Far East by way of the Cape of Good Hope.

However, this was not that due westerly route which philosophers and wise men spoke of, which tradition almost laid down as a fact, and the adventurous nations still pondered, still wondered whether it existed. Even in England the subject was as much in the minds of our sailors as in those of Portugal and Spain, and many a ship put out from Bristol intent on its discovery. But the attempt always ended in failure, for, after steering to the west for two weeks, perhaps, the mariners would fancy that they were on the wrong track, and would make some other course, finally returning disappointed to Bristol.

But the Spaniards succeeded in discovering land to the west, if none others had done so, for in 1494 Vicente Pinzon, with Americo Vespucci, put out for the west, and came upon Brazil, the River Amazon, and the coast of South America. It was thought that the East Indies had been found, that the western passage had been hit upon, for no one dreamed that the huge continent of America intervened. And it was not till later, till after Columbus's later voyages, and the discovery of the Pacific Ocean, and the rounding of Cape Horn by Magalhaes, that the full significance of the new land was understood. Then, owing to an error, by which

A City by the Water

Americo Vespucci was thought to be the commander of the expedition which fell in with Brazil, the whole continent was given the title which it now bears.

The description of these voyages brings us at length to that first one of Columbus, a doughty sailor who had often taken part in the Portuguese trips along the west coast of Africa. He was, in fact, in the service of Portugal, and this theory of a western passage must often have been pondered on during the voyages he made in that service. At length it grew into a firm belief, and he went to Henry of Portugal with the desire that he might be offered the command of an expedition. But this was not the wish of the Portuguese, for were they to discover this western passage they could not keep it to themselves, while the coast of Africa, which they had found, and had commenced to colonize, was theirs by right, and could not so easily be usurped. Columbus therefore received no encouragement, and in despair sent his appeal to the court of Spain, and to Henry the Seventh of England. Accident alone placed him in the service of Spain, for when at length the message reached him from England, ordering him to attend the court, an arrangement had been come to with Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. Thereafter preparations were made for the voyage, and on August 3, 1492, he set sail. It is needless to tell of his progress, to relate how, after sailing for some three weeks, he still saw nothing but sea about him, and how his men desired him to return, believing that were they to sail over the horizon there would be no escape, and no power of getting back to their native land. Then they found themselves surrounded by a mass

Roger the Bold

of seaweed, extending as far as the eye could reach, and through which they slowly cleaved their way. At length, after a voyage of thirty-six days, land was sighted, and after three months the bold mariners returned with the information that they had discovered an island, and a continent near at hand. This island, now known as Hayti, or San Domingo, was called Hispaniola, while the adjacent country, thought by Columbus, to the day of his death, to be part of a continent, proved to be an island, and was called Cuba.

Thereafter this fine sailor made three voyages, discovering the northern coast of South America in the neighbourhood of Trinidad. He had come to the Indies, he thought—to Earthly Paradise, as he called the land—never suspecting that this was a new and undiscovered world, and that Vicente Pinzon's voyage, together with that of Magalhaes's rounding of the southern cape, would prove it to be part of a mighty continent, then peopled by a dusky race, but hereafter to form a home for new nations of white and coloured men.

The reader can imagine how the tale of this discovery fired the people of Spain, and engrafted in the minds of all, in that of old and young alike, a longing for new fields, for adventure in these foreign parts. For Columbus told of a friendly people, of gorgeous scenery and herbage, and of pearls in abundance. What wonder if thousands clamoured to follow! Spain was at peace, and there was no other outlet for the spirit of chivalry with which her young men were filled. So an expedition was arranged, and Ojeda commanded it. But he fell out with the natives and fought with them, so

A City by the Water

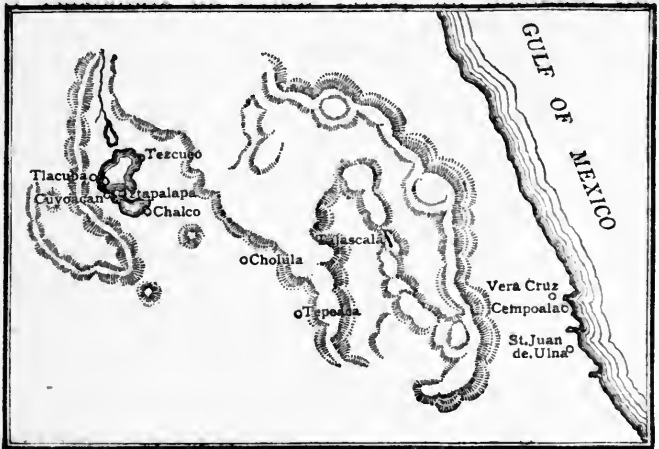
that when other voyagers came they met too often with the reverse of a welcome.

It would be tedious to detail the names of all the adventurous dons who followed, to tell how Cristobal Guerra and Alonso Nino came directly on Ojeda's heels, and how, with more discretion and perception, they took pains to do as Columbus had done, making friends with the natives. From the latter they obtained for paltry wares an abundance of pearls, all of which had come from the pearl fisheries close at hand, these lying at an island which was so sterile that the natives did not inhabit it. By name Cabagua, it, of course, formed a great attraction to the Spaniards, and when the tale of their success came with them to Spain, and these adventurers carried their stores of pearls ashore, as if they were so many pebbles, the fame of their undertaking went through the breadth of the land. Thousands clamoured to follow, so that ere very long this island was colonized, a town being built there, and named "New Cadiz." Thus we find Spaniards on the mainland, or within a very little distance of it. Nor was it long before La Casas and others followed, all with the one thought of making a fortune.

Some were content to accomplish this purpose by hard work at the fisheries, but others soon took to another trade, and commenced to hunt for slaves. It cannot be a matter of wonder to the reader to hear that these fiends in the end provoked a peaceful group of natives, for along the thousands of leagues of the pearl coast there were numerous races and tribes, many of them of sufficient numbers to be designated nations. They turned, and many a Spanish soldier and monk paid the penalty.

Roger the Bold

But this portion of the northern coast of South America hardly concerns us, though its discovery directly led up to farther wanderings, to more voyages of discovery, and to the finding of Yucatan, of the Isthmus of Panama, and finally to the discovery by the intrepid Vasco Nunez de Bilbao of the Southern Sea, the wide Pacific; for this man actually accomplished the journey across the Isth-



MAP OF PART OF MEXICO.

mus of Panama, and reached the farther coast, where he learned vaguely of the wonders of Peru, of a country where natives lived in stone houses, and in cities; where there was a well-ordered government with a king, and where, as was afterwards discovered during the conquest of these Peruvians, a system of roads existed than which there has never been anything finer. Indeed, an inspection

A City by the Water

of what remains of these coast roads to-day shows that they were excellently engineered, that they were composed of tough concrete which still holds together, while bridges connected the road across the rivers. More than that, by a system of couriers, stationed at close intervals of some forty yards, it was possible to send a verbal message over the road at a swift rate, the couriers running their forty yards and handing on the message. And that same message could thus be transmitted for a distance of a thousand miles.

However, Peru even does not concern us, for it is to Mexico that we turn, to the northern portion of the long isthmus which connects North to South America, and is spoken of in these days as Central America.

The great Fernando Cortes set sail from Santiago, in Cuba, on November 18, 1518, his banner bearing a coloured cross on a black background, with flames showing here and there, and an inscription in Latin beneath, which read, "Let us follow the Cross, and in that sign we shall conquer."

He sailed with an armament of five hundred and fifty Spaniards, two or three hundred Indians, a few negroes, twelve or fifteen horses, ten brass guns, and some falconets. Touching at Trinidad, he then went to the island of Cosumel, near the north-eastern point of Yucatan, where he was so fortunate to come upon the survivor of a crew of Spaniards who had been wrecked, and who, having lived with the natives for very long, spoke their language fluently. In this manner an excellent interpreter was obtained.

Fernando then set his prow for the west, and came to Tabasco, where he landed, and encountering

Roger the Bold

resistance from the natives, fought a great battle, defeating his enemy. But Tabasco was not the country for which he aimed, and it was the ambition of this leader to go farther north, to discover new lands, and to find wealth. Nor was he destined to be disappointed, for the Tabascans could tell tales of other countries, tales which had come to their ears, and there was one amongst them who had lived in the provinces of a country which paid tribute to Mexico. This person was a female slave, by name Marina, and she was given, together with others, to the Spaniards after their victory. Thus Cortes, almost at the very commencement of his voyage, found himself in possession of a Spaniard able to converse with the Mexicans, and of a woman slave of rare intelligence, and, as was to be afterwards proved, of the utmost loyalty to her new masters, who could make up for any deficiencies of the Spaniard.

With this success to encourage him, Cortes embarked again, and set sail for the north, arriving at a portion of the coast opposite to Mexico, which lay some little distance inland, hidden by its encircling mountains, and to which he gave the name of St. Juan de Ulua. Here he met with a friendly reception from the natives, and very shortly received in audience two gorgeous officers who had been sent by the great king Montezuma, the lord of Mexico.

To all the expressed wishes of the Spaniards for a permit to go to the city of Mexico this Montezuma returned evasive replies, and finally forbade them to come. And on every occasion on which he sent his envoys they came to Cortes laden with gold and

A City by the Water

jewels, and with feathered cloaks, all gifts to the Spaniards, a mark of the king's high favour. Had he sent anything else, or words alone, he would have done much better, and perhaps the history of Mexico would be vastly different to-day; for Cortes and his company had a quicker eye and a readier ear for riches and tales of riches, of gold and jewels, than they had for lands, for peoples as yet undiscovered. They were tempted, and this refusal to allow them to proceed acted rather as a spur than as a deterrent. Cortes was not the man to be balked by any one, and certainly not by a native, even if he were a king. He was ambitious, as has been said, decisive and bold, and, in addition, was of a dogged disposition. He had come to discover, to gain new lands for the king, his master, and he would not be deterred by a native. Had he known the warlike disposition of the Mexicans, and the armies which they and their allies were able to put into the field, it is possible that he would have hastily embarked again, and sailed for Hispaniola or Cuba, with a view to gathering fresh forces. But there was more than doggedness and sheer contrariness as a cause for his determination to go to the city of Mexico; for it happened that Cortes had many enemies—so many, in fact, that though the command had been given to him, Velazques would have taken it from him within a day or two, and, indeed, sent a messenger with instructions that Cortes was to be recalled. However, this was not what this gallant leader wanted, and he evaded the summons and proceeded to the coast of New Spain. To return now unsuccessful would mean not alone the loss of command, but much more. Indeed, Cortes had

Roger the Bold

disobeyed the orders of those in authority, so that to gain his own pardon it was necessary for him to make some conquest, and to establish his right to lead. Therefore, in spite of the numbers opposed to him, numbers which he learned were big, but the proportions of which he never even guessed at, he decided to push on for Mexico, and conquer the country if that were possible. We shall see how he fared in this adventure, and how the very fact of his being a white man aided him; also how circumstances played into his hands, so as to render him the utmost help. But Roger de Luce is still in his cage, and we will return to him.

"I have been speaking with one of the prisoners," said Tamba, some little while after Roger had awakened, and had looked about him with curious eyes. "Our tongue is somewhat like his, but he also speaks Spanish. He is one of the allies of these men who came to Cuba, and he was captured in a battle which took place a little while ago."

"Then the Spanish under Fernando Cortes are here!" exclaimed Roger, in some astonishment, for this was the first intimation he had had of that fact. "Did you ask how long they had been in Mexico, and what success they had had?"

"They were here some months, and have been gone a little while, my lord," was the answer. "The Mexicans rose, and drove them out. Now they are awaiting their return."

"And will they submit?" demanded Roger, anxiously. "For then we shall become captives of the Spaniards, and that would be worse even than this."

There was a doubting look in Tamba's eyes, and

A City by the Water

for a little while he hesitated whether to tell his young master of the critical position in which they were. At length he summoned courage, and spoke.

"To be a Spanish captive again could hardly be worse than our fate now," he said softly. "My lord is now a prisoner in the hands of the Mexicans, and he knows nothing of these people, save that they live in the centre of a lake. He does not know of their cruelty, and of their wicked practices."

Roger was entirely ignorant, to speak the truth, and, more than that, was amazed at the size of Mexico, and the huge numbers of people he saw about when he looked down from the pass, and the fine houses in which they lived. Till then he had hardly expected the natives in this new part to be much different from those to be seen in Cuba. But he was to learn much in the next few hours, and before he departed from Mexico was to know that these Aztecs were in many ways highly civilized, practising many of the higher arts and crafts, learned in picture writing, and able engineers. Alongside these attainments, Roger learned that they had certain practices which were strangely incongruous in a people so advanced in civilization, and that the nation, from the highest downwards, was swayed by the cruellest superstitions and religious rites. He was now to hear of one of the latter.

"Their wicked practices!" he gasped. "What do you mean? They looked peaceful enough, and rather melancholy, I thought. What are these practices?"

"The sacrifice, master," said Tamba, mournfully. "These Mexicans have many gods to whom they look, and whom they seek to appease, some with

Roger the Bold

gifts of meat and cereals, others with the sacrifice of animals, while there is one in particular, the mighty war god, named Huitzilopochtli, to whom they offer men."

"Men! They sacrifice human beings!" exclaimed Roger, in disgust and dismay. "Then we——"

"Are reserved for that fate; and all these others, master. They will kill us so that we may bring fortune to them in their wars, and aid them against the Spaniards."

"Then they take us for enemies instead of friends," said Roger, quickly. "They think, perhaps, that we are Spaniards in Cortes's band, and therefore will be more than ever inclined to kill us."

"They say that we are a portion of these invaders, and that we must die. The man with whom I spoke told me that. He says that we may be summoned at any time, and that they will drag us to this war god. It is a horrible thought!"

Roger looked about him as if in a dream. He was stupefied and stunned by the awful news which Tamba had given him; for though he had by now met danger boldly and without flinching, and had risked his life in the encounters with the Spaniards, yet this cruel fate undermined his courage. He was ready to die when the time came, but to be held down, perhaps, and then slaughtered like a sheep, was too horrible. The thought unmanned him, and for a little while he sank on his knees, his face buried in his hands. Then he gradually recovered his composure and looked about him, his eye turning to the prisoners in the second cage. There were at least two hundred of them, and he was astounded to find that they were

A City by the Water

chatting contentedly together, some even laughing and joking. Was the same fate reserved for them? He turned and asked Tamba the question.

"The same, my lord," was the calm answer. "But these men look upon it in a different way. Thousands die here every year for the sake of the gods, and death in that manner is an honour. I have asked this man, and he said that their religion teaches them that to be sacrificed gives instant admission to the region of the sun, where they live happily afterwards. As to the death, it is swift and sure, and the deed is soon done. Fear not, master, for it may not come to that. Perhaps they will believe that you are no Spaniard."

It was poor consolation, but Roger had to make the most of it. He sat for a long while thinking the matter over, and when a few hours had gone, was himself again, prepared to face the executioners, should it come to that. But the native prisoners amazed him. True, all these Aztecs had a melancholy cast of countenance, but a glance at their faces showed that the doom awaiting them made little impression, and did not weigh on their minds. They were resigned and happy. Later on he learned that throughout the land of Mexico these sacrifices were carried on, and that at the lowest computation twenty thousand men died on the sacrificial altars during the year. The people were held fast in the chains of a cruel religious despotism, and bowed themselves in abject resignation. They saw their finest children, their sons and their firstborn torn from them, and acquiesced because their superstitions bade them do so. It was a horrible condition of affairs, and cruel though the Spaniards

Roger the Bold

were, their coming was a boon to the country, though it broke up the Aztec races. However, we are anticipating, and will return to Roger.

Late in the afternoon there was a stir in the huge quadrangle in which the cages were built, and attendants came with food for the captives. Then a mass of people began to filter into the square, and amongst them some who were dressed in black robes, and wore their hair in long tangled wreaths about their necks and faces. They were ugly-looking fellows, and Roger shuddered as he looked at them.

"The priests," whispered Tamba, "and that"—pointing to one clad in scarlet—"is the head of all, the one who performs the sacrifice. They are coming towards us."

"Then we will fight till we are killed! Sooner than than be butchered. Let us look for a weapon, Tamba, and then we will set these fellows at defiance."

He sprang to his feet and searched the cage, but there was nothing to help him. He and Tamba had long since been deprived of their weapons, while the floor of the cage was bare, and it would have required an axe to sever one of the stout bars. Opposition was out of the question, and Roger promptly realized it. He faced round and watched the priests as they advanced, looking them unflinchingly in the face. Then his eye turned to some half-dozen other men who walked behind the men in black and scarlet, gorgeously dressed in feathered cloaks and light golden armour, while their heads were covered, some with carved wooden helmets, made to represent the heads of birds, while others

A City by the Water

had plumes in their hair. But all displayed many golden bangles and neck-chains, and their head-dress and many parts of their armour and their weapons were encrusted with jewels. Then the tale was true. Mexico was filled with riches! But Roger had no time to give a thought to that now, for the procession had reached the cage. It halted outside, and two of the priests entered and said something in soft tones.

"We don't understand," said Roger, in English. "We are not Spaniards, and we want to know why you have placed us in this cage. We are not wild beasts, and are ready to be friendly."

It was hopeless. The priest merely shook his head and beckoned to them.

"Try him with your tongue, Tamba," said Roger, in desperation. "Ah, I remember that you said you could not make them understand. I will try Spanish."

"We have nothing to do with your enemies," he said sternly, standing to his full height. "We wish you no harm. Let us have an interpreter, and we will explain."

Again he met with failure, while the priest still beckoned politely, and answered in soft tones. Roger looked about him desperately, and noticed that the other priests had now entered the cage, and had taken up their places near at hand. He measured them with his eye, and wondered whether he could kill them all if he fell upon them. Then he recollected the crowd outside, and pondered.

"Shall we go or stay?" he demanded of Tamba. "We could clear these fellows out of this and bar

Roger the Bold

the door. Then they would be unable to get at us. Anything rather than be sacrificed."

"Perhaps that is not their wish, master," answered Tamba. "They speak softly to us, and there is no harshness. Supposing we went, deciding to resist only when they attempt to lay hands on us or to lash us. For to drive them from the cage and hold it would merely mean that they would shoot clouds of arrows at us. You can see their bows."

Roger looked, and saw that every man in the assembled throng carried a small bow and a quiver of arrows, while many also had a long club-shaped weapon thrust into belts about their waists. This was their sword, called the "maquahuitl," and consisted of a stick some three and a half feet long, about four inches thick at the biggest end, and was armed on either side with small blades of obsidian, a stone of extreme hardness, and capable of taking a razor edge. Indeed, these weapons could give a terrible wound, though the first stroke, if it met Spanish armour, was apt to break the stone, when the weapon became an ordinary club. In addition, others of the crowd carried lances, and a few slings, with a bag of stones about their shoulders. All were dressed in linen garments, which were clean and well made. It was obvious that resistance at this point was out of the question, and therefore Roger decided to put the best face on the matter.

"We will go with them," he said at length; "and do you keep a sharp eye on me, Tamba. I don't mean to be slaughtered without a struggle, and if I see that it is coming to that, I will make a rush at the nearest man with arms and seize them. One of those swords of theirs would suit me, though I

A City by the Water

would rather it were heavier and bigger. Now then; we will move. We are ready," he said, turning to the priests. "Keep close, Tamba. I don't like the look of these fellows."

With a bow he intimated that they would follow, and a minute later found them outside the cage. Then the procession reformed. The priests lined up on either side of their prisoners, the one in scarlet taking his place in front. A horn was blown, and they set off for the far side of the square, the warriors in their gorgeous trappings falling in behind, while the crowd followed in any order, their eyes fixed on the tall figure of the white man. Presently the procession passed out of the square, and Roger noted with a qualm that their steps were trending towards a gigantic tower which stood some little way in front. Was it the sacrificial tower, where men were slain to appease the god of war—the Mexican Mars? Roger looked askance at Tamba, and noted that he too was ill at ease. Then he turned his attention to his surroundings, marvelling at the beauty of the scene and at the thousands of well-dressed and prosperous people who surrounded them. Indeed, Mexico was *en fête*. The surroundings of the square were thronged with the people, and all had their eyes fixed upon the white prisoner. They greeted his coming with shouts of joy and admiration, while mothers held their children up above their heads that they might see. On every side the flat roofs bore their human load, while numerous adjacent towers were black along that side which faced the larger one, the nodding of plumes and the gay colour of the clothing showing that people were also crowded there.

Roger the Bold

"We cause some attention to be shown," said Roger, beneath his breath. "It would seem as though these Mexicans wish to do honour to us, for watch how some throw themselves on their knees as we pass, while others wave their hands to us. Perhaps, after all, our fears are groundless."

Tamba shook his head disconsolately, for his conversation with the Aztec captive had told him another tale. However, he would not cause his master unnecessary alarm, and refrained, therefore, from answering.

"He will find out in good time," he murmured to himself. "Happier for him if I keep silent. For me, this death is nothing. A few weeks ago I would have welcomed any fate which took me from the Spaniards, and now all that I live for is this white man, my master. If he dies, then so will I also."

By now the procession had passed across a wide courtyard sprinkled thickly with scented blossoms, and was at the foot of the tower. The latter measured at least a hundred feet on each face, and rose for many yards till the first terrace was reached. There were three or four more above that, so that the summit overtopped the city. Leading the way to one corner, the priest in scarlet began to ascend by way of a flight of steps which passed round the sides of the tower, reaching the first terrace after encircling it once. There another flight commenced, and so on till the summit was reached. Not till then did Roger realize the significance of all this display, of the assembled crowds, and of their shouts of joy. Arrived on the summit, his eye lit upon a huge figure in the shape of a serpent,

A City by the Water

coloured and jewelled with numerous stones. Directly in front of this, and occupying such a position that all in the streets of Mexico could observe it, was an enormous green stone, with smoothed faces, and with convex top. But worse than all was the presence of blood on this stone, and upon the hideous image of the war god. Roger then knew that he had been brought to the sacrifice, and in an instant his resolve was taken.

"They shall cut me to pieces first before I submit," he said to Tamba. "Watch me now, and prepare to act. If one of those hideous priests approaches me, I will break away from the crowd and seize one of those corners. Look, Tamba there is a chapel or room of some sort over there. We will make it a fort."

There was no time for more. The black-robed priests advanced to the green stone altar and politely beckoned to Roger, while the crowds below became strangely silent, their eagerness stilling their tongues.

"Come," said the priest in the scarlet cloak, beckoning again, "we will not delay, or keep the war god waiting. Let the white stranger advance first and lie upon the altar."

The time had come. A priest closed in on either side of Roger, while others fell in behind. He was surrounded, and the moment for action had arrived.

CHAPTER IX

Led to the Sacrific

TERRIBLE indeed was the position in which Roger and Tamba found themselves, and there is little wonder that the former was goaded to desperation by the thought of the fate awaiting him. His figure was drawn to its fullest height and his muscles stood out tensely. There was a moisture on his forehead, while his hands were clammy with fear. In a dream he saw the scarlet-cloaked high priest, and marked his tattered and filthy locks, and the marks on his head and neck of self-inflicted penance. He saw the black-robed helpers at his elbow, the serpent form of the god of war, and the fire which burned before the idol and was never allowed to die out. Then his eye roamed to the others congregated on the summit of the tower, to the silent and expectant crowds in the streets below, on every housetop, and on the hundred and more towers which rose from the enormous enclosure in the heart of the city given up to the priesthood. He even noted the smoke of the sacrificial fires there, and wondered vaguely who lit them, and who replenished the fuel. Then the curving obsidian knife of the high priest caught his attention, while the touch of that individual's hand sent a thrill through him.

Led to the Sacrifice

"The altar awaits you," said the priest, softly, as if he bore the utmost friendship for Roger. "We will not keep the god of war waiting."

His words and the touch of his hand awakened Roger thoroughly. A second or so before he had seemed dazed; but now he was in possession of his full vigour, both of mind and body. He stirred, beat the priest's hand away, and looked at Tamba.

"The time has come. Seize a weapon and follow me," he said.

At that instant the remaining priests closed round him, for it was their custom for four or five to lift the victim to the altar and hold him there while their chief performed the murderous act. Roger saw their meaning, and swung round suddenly; then he charged them, and with a blow to right and left scattered them on either side. A stately and gorgeous Mexican chief, one of the few who had come near to the cage that afternoon, stood near at hand, and in an instant Roger had him in his arms.

"To the chapel!" he shouted, "and prepare to bar the door if there is one. If not, look for something with which we can fill it, and keep these others out. Quick! The priests will be after us."

Bearing his captive on one arm, as if he were a child, he rushed across the summit of the tower, a hoarse roar of amazement and fury swelling the air as he did so. The entrance to a small chapel lay before him, and he followed Tamba through it, the latter having snatched a native sword as he ran.

"There is no door, master!" he called out in dismay. "There is only a curtain of feather work with bells at the bottom."

Roger the Bold

This, in fact, was the case, and it was the general arrangement throughout the temples and private houses of the Mexicans. They had no doors, and merely hung a curtain across the entrance, the curtain being very often of the most beautiful workmanship, and having attached at the bottom a number of bells made of tiny shells or of silver, which gave timely notice of the approach of a stranger.

Within the chamber all was gloomy at first after the brilliant sunshine outside. But in the space of a second or two Roger's eyes became accustomed to the half light, and he gave vent to a shout as he discovered an object.

"Here is a carving of some sort," he called out, "and made of stone, too. We must get it to the door. One moment, though."

In a twinkling he wrenched the arms from the hand and belt of his captive and flung him into a corner. Then he seized the object—one of the Mexican deities—while Tamba came eagerly to his help. They put their whole strength into the task, causing the idol to totter on its pedestal. It moved a few inches across the paved floor, and encouraged by this, Roger bent to the work with all his might.

"Now, together!" he shouted. "Shove with all your might. It moves! It is sliding along the floor. Again, and we have it in position."

At any other time it would have taken them at least a quarter of an hour to have moved this mass of stone, but fear and desperation had given them power which they could not have summoned on another occasion. As Roger's grasp riveted itself about the thigh and neck of the inanimate figure the whole idol swayed, and when Tamba pushed

Led to the Sacrifice

with his shoulder it glided with a grating sound across the tiles. Once they had got it to move they never rested till it was in the doorway, where it struck with a thud, presenting an almost impenetrable barrier to the enemy, and a face which was even more hideous than that of the god of war, to which the Mexicans had given such an unpronounceable name. However, though the mass of stone effectively checked a rush, it was still possible to reach the inmates of the chapel over the head and shoulders of the idol; and very soon those without showed that that was their intention. A head darkened the bright patch close to the top of the door, and a second followed. They were priests, and Roger determined to read them a lesson.

“Stand back, and watch this prisoner of mine,” he said to Tamba. “Now see me deal with these butchers.”

The sight of the priests seemed to madden him and stir his desperation, and as Tamba hastened to obey him, Roger stepped coolly across the tiles, and, with a quick movement, snatched at one of the priests. He was a tall, thin man, and our hero's grasp closed on his neck. With a wrench he drew him through the entrance, and with his other hand arrested the blow which the Mexican aimed at him. Then he caught him up, and, stepping closer, threw him with all his force at the head of his comrade. There was a thud. The body of the priest struck half against the one who was staring into the chapel, and half against the head and neck of the idol. But Roger had used all his force, and followed it up by a push which completed the task. A second later there was a dull thud, as the man he had just dealt

Roger the Bold

with crashed through the narrow space and fell on the flags outside. Then, indeed, did Roger know of the presence of the crowd, for, from every quarter of the lake city, from the courtyards below, from the scented gardens on the roofs, and from the summit of a hundred towers, a hoarse roar of indignation and of rage came to his ears. It swelled into a fanatical shriek, which silenced the cries of those on the summit of the tower on which the war god stood, and it filled the tiny chapel in which the two fugitives had taken up their quarters. Even their prisoner heard it, though he was half dazed by the suddenness of the action which had snatched him from the middle of his friends. He heard, and lifted a face which showed the utmost consternation.

"The gods are indeed furious, and must be appeased," he said. "Why did you do such a thing? Surely you and your comrades have already caused sufficient suffering to us!"

He spoke in Spanish—in poor Spanish, it is true; but Roger could understand him, and at the sound of his voice turned with a flush on his cheek.

"Then you can speak the language?" he said angrily. "Why did you not offer to interpret when we were in the cage? I asked for some one to make us known to your friends, and to explain that we were not Spanish, but no one came forward. You were there. Why did you not proffer your services?"

It looked for a moment as if he would have done some injury to the noble, for that this Mexican undoubtedly was. But whatever his intention, it was frustrated within a second, for there was a shout outside, a mass of men threw themselves against

Led to the Sacrifice

the idol, and, using all their force, hurled it into the chapel. It fell backward on to the tiled floor with a crash, which split fragments from it. Then it rolled sideways and lay across the entrance, leaving a wide chasm above, through which a couple of men, or even three, could enter abreast; and on the far side it exposed a crowd of jewelled Mexicans and five furious priests, whose faces showed their animosity. At their feet, feebly endeavouring to rise to his knees, was the one whom Roger had treated so roughly.

For a few seconds there was a pause, while the opponents faced one another across the fallen image. Then there was a shout from the scarlet-robed priest. He and his helpers stood aside, while a number of fighting men filled their places, and these flung themselves at Roger, grabbing fiercely at him with their bare hands, as if they desired to take him alive and without the use of a weapon. In fact, this was their intention, following their usual custom in warfare, where they strove to capture prisoners for the sacrifice rather than to kill their enemies.

“Be ready to meet any who get past me!” shouted Roger, glancing over his shoulder towards Tamba, “and try to keep an eye on our prisoner. I will keep these fellows back with this club.”

He had taken the Mexican's sword from him on entering the chapel, and had carried it since secured to his arm by a leathern thong attached to the handle for that purpose. With a swing he brought it into his hand, and as the enemy crushed into the opening and endeavoured to grapple with him, he struck fiercely at them. And he was only just in time, for one of the enemy leapt with reckless courage over

Roger the Bold

the idol, and flung his arms round Roger's legs, while a second closed with him so swiftly that before very long he would have been helpless. But the native sword came to his aid. He lifted it well above his head, and brought it down on the shoulder of the last assailant with a crash which shook the breath from his body, and left him senseless on the tiles. For the first he found a summary means of ridding himself of his embrace; for with a sudden movement he loosened the man's grip, and then, before he could close round his legs again, he brought his knee up with a jerk which caused it to strike the Mexican full in the face. It was a terrible blow, and the man fell as if he had been felled with an axe. But there were others at hand, and, undeterred by the unfortunate ending of their comrades, they came on furiously, whistling and crying in shrill tones.

"Stand back!" shouted Roger, standing just within the doorway with the native sword, now little better than a club, over his shoulder, and looking like a lion at bay. "Stand back, or I will kill every soul who ventures to attack me!"

"He has insulted our gods! Bring him out and sacrifice him!" shrieked those outside. "Let us see this foreigner slain on the altar! Bring him out without delay!"

"Then I swear that many of you shall die before I am killed by your butchers!" shouted Roger, seeing that they were about to attack. "Up to this I have played with you; now I shall strike to kill!"

He was as good as his word, too, and for many minutes the scene at the narrow doorway was appalling and magnificent. There was no need as

Led to the Sacrifice

yet for Tamba to help his master, for Roger de Luce had already shown his prowess, and had fought with men who were fully armed and protected. Now he was contesting the path with natives who bore only the lightest armour, and who, moreover, sought to take him alive. But their numbers made the danger, and our hero realized that once he permitted more than three or four to enter alive he and Tamba would be dragged to the floor. It was therefore with the utmost fury that he set upon the attackers. Thanks to the fact that the entrance to the chapel was narrow, not more than three could come at him at one time, and these he cut down with terrific blows from his club. They staggered and fell, tumbling upon the idol, while a few rolled over it into the chapel. But still they came, till one blow, a little stronger than its predecessors, caused the club to break into fragments. Even then Roger would not give way, and, dropping the club, he flung himself upon the Mexicans after their own fashion, only, instead of attempting to grasp them, he struck right and left with his clenched fists till the entrance was cleared and the enemy retreated in consternation.

"We will rush them!" shouted Roger, seeing the effect which his fighting had made. "Leave the prisoner, Tamba, and follow! Close your fists and strike in every direction! Now, quickly, before those priests can rally them!"

There was just a bare chance of success, and they snatched at it eagerly. With a bound and a shout which helped to startle the natives, Roger cleared the entrance, his faithful companion close at his heel. Then he rushed at a group of the enemy

Roger the Bold

who stood about the priests discussing the situation with them. There was a shriek of dismay. A few of the Mexicans faced their white prisoner, and endeavoured to check his advance, but the old methods succeeded. Roger's fist brought consternation to their minds, and hardly had the first opponent measured his full length on the ground than the others took to their heels and raced for the stairway which led to the courts below; nor did they halt till they were safely amongst the crowd.

"A hot fight," said Roger, breathlessly, and with a reckless laugh. "Never before have I used my fists to such purpose. Look at the knuckles. Even in England I never fought so much, nor struck so many blows. And they are really gone, Tamba?"

"All save the men who have fallen to your blows, my lord, and the noble whom you captured," answered the native, eyeing his master with amazement. "Truly it was a brave fight, and I have never seen men struck to the ground in such a way. Show me how it was done."

Roger doubled his fist, and displayed a row of knuckles from which the skin had been torn.

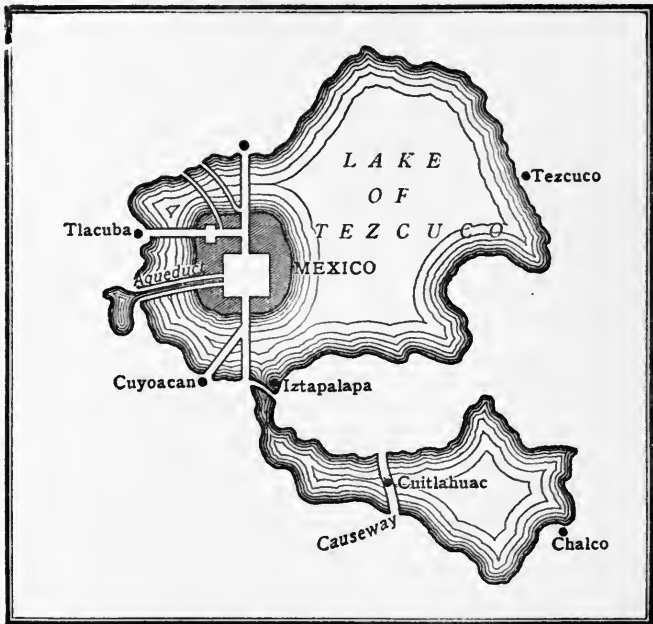
"Their teeth are sharp," he said, again with a reckless laugh, "and they fight with their mouths open. That is the way, Tamba; close the hand, and put the thumb so. Then hit out from the shoulder, and aim for the face. A good blow will fell an enemy. But what about these men who are lying about us? None are killed, except, perhaps, one or two whom I struck with the club. We must get rid of them; and, above all, we must take pains to keep our prisoner. Go to him now, and tell him that he will be killed if he attempts to escape. I will

Led to the Sacrifice

look at our enemies, and will place them on the flight of steps. Collect a few of the arms as you go, for we shall need them. And, Tamba——”

“What next, my lord?”

“Have a look into their pouches. Some may



MAP SHOWING MEXICO CITY AND SURROUNDINGS.

contain food, and we shall want it perhaps. I mean to remain here till I am exhausted or until these fellows admit their friendship for us. Those priests will be our worst foes. They will never forgive the rough treatment I have given them. There, off you go, and let me know what success you have.”

Roger the Bold

For a little while Roger sat down upon a seat which faced the hideous image of the war god, glancing listlessly at the huge green slab of stone, with its convex upper surface, upon which he was to have been placed, and on which he might yet lose his life. Then his eye wandered from the figures of the fallen Mexicans to the towers within the courtyard of the temple, and to the houses about.

“Just like the drawing on the disc,” he reflected. “There was a huge square in the very centre of the buildings, and a tower in it. And close beside was the part marked with beasts and birds. There they are, too, as I live! It must be a cage in which they tame the animals.”

From his elevated position he could see over the whole city of Mexico, and distinctly observed the aviaries and menageries kept by the king and by his priests. Also as his eye roamed farther afield he saw numerous canoes moving across the water, and in one quarter of the city another enormous square, which acted as a public market. But he had little time for such details. The situation demanded his whole attention, and now that he had recovered his breath he turned to face the difficulties which confronted him. Taking up a fallen sword, he strolled from one to another of the Mexicans, and turned them upon their backs. Some were still unconscious, while a few suffered from broken limbs, and were otherwise unhurt. In these cases Roger tenderly straightened the leg, and placed it in such a position that the man was comfortable. Then he went to another, till he had been the round of all who had been injured.

Led to the Sacrifice

"Fourteen," he said, with a smile of satisfaction, "and a few must have got away. That thin priest still lies here groaning, and indeed I gave him good cause. I wonder whether he would make a valuable hostage? I will keep him, and get rid of these other fellows. Come, Tamba," he shouted, seeing the native emerge from the chapel, "lend me a hand, and we will drag these men to the stairs. I shall keep the priest with our other prisoner, for they may be useful. We might even arrange a kind of exchange, they to have their liberty while we have a guarantee of safety. But what did the prisoner say?"

"That he would swear to remain and leave us unhampered. He speaks of you as if he thought you as fine as one of his own gods. He says also that there is a mistake, and that the people will find it out."

"I hope so," was Roger's answer, "and in a little while when we have made ourselves secure we will talk to him. But let us see to this matter, and keep a careful eye on the stairs below. I have been watching, and so far I have seen no one venture to ascend."

Some minutes later, when the two had contrived to drag all their unconscious enemies to the top of the stairway and had carried them down a few paces, they returned to the chapel, taking the priest with them. They found the noble seated in one corner, thoroughly resigned, and eager to talk to his captors. As Roger entered he rose to his feet, and bowed with every sign of humility.

"I did not hear your words down in the court below," he said, by way of excuse. "I was one of

Roger the Bold

the few who came to take part in the procession, but I stood some way outside the cage. It is only now that I have learned from your servant that you are no Spaniard. Till you brought me here I thought that you were one of our hated enemies, those who have brought such misery to us, and have killed our king. Remember, when you spoke to the priest you used the tongue of these ruthless invaders, so that it was natural that I should take you for one of them."

"And now you know that I am of a different nation. I came to these parts with comrades, and met the Spaniards in battle. I am ready to fight them again, and will aid your friends if they will allow me. But they must never attempt to attack me again, or to drag me to this temple."

"I will explain all to them, and shall hope to convince them," was the answer. "But they are angry. Listen to their shouts. Our gods have been insulted, and they call for some atonement. A sacrifice is needed to appease our deities. Now tell me from what country you come, and what has brought you here."

"Gladly," said Roger. "But first I will see that we are not caught napping. Tamba, take post at the top of the stairway and keep watch. Let me know if you observe any movement."

He sat down on the fallen idol while the native went to carry out his orders. Then he told the Mexican how he had sailed from England, and how he and his comrades came, hoping to obtain gold and silver and jewels.

"They are prized in our country," he said, "and we were ready to barter fairly for them. Our hold

Led to the Sacrifice

was filled with useful articles, which we were prepared to exchange."

"And these comrades. Where are they now?" demanded the Mexican.

Roger shrugged his shoulders. "The Spaniards kept them from returning to this coast to pick me up," he said. "They may be anywhere. I have had no news of them."

"Then I can speak of their whereabouts," said the Mexican, suddenly. "Our spies tell us of much that is happening, and our couriers have brought news of another ship seen off the coast. It was chased by the Spaniards, and guns were fired. Then it appeared to the north, and a landing was made. Your friends are now trading along the coast, and there you will find them."

The news came as a huge relief to Roger, and he could almost have shouted with joy. Then he suddenly remembered his position, and gave vent to a groan of disappointment.

"Find them!" he said disdainfully. "Find them, when some thousands of your countrymen are endeavouring to see me sacrificed! How am I to get to this coast, when this tower is surrounded by men who are eager to have me killed?"

How indeed! Even the noble with whom he conversed could not explain that, while the hoarse murmurs from below, the blowing of horns in the temple courtyard, and the obvious anger of the priests and of the crowd, made it more than probable that escape would be next to impossible, and that nothing but the death of the tall stranger would atone for what had happened. But Roger was a youth who had been born with a stubborn

Roger the Bold

nature, and now that he had crossed swords with these superstitious natives he began to have less fear of them. He had gained the upper hand in a miraculous manner, and had now captured the summit of the tower, and also two important hostages. He had only to hold out a little while and something might happen to bring relief. The thought led him to remember that food and drink would be necessary, and at once he went to Tamba, to find the native seated on the edge of the tower, carefully watching the flights of steps below.

"There is much excitement," he answered, in reply to Roger's question as to what was passing; "and once I saw a procession of priests and fighting men coming towards the tower. But they went on and disappeared. But the crowds still line the towers over yonder, and the house-tops."

"Which makes it appear as if they had not given up thought of the sacrifice. Well, we must disappoint them. Tell me, did you find food in the bags of any of those who fell?"

"None," was the answer; "but there are other buildings here, and perhaps a search will produce something."

Roger went off at once, and entered every one of the smaller buildings which were on the top of the tower. There were, in fact, four smaller towers rising from the corners of this big erection, on which stood the statue of the war god, and in each were several apartments, the fittings of which showed that a priest or priests were accustomed to live there.

"Probably the fellow who keeps the fire going," thought Roger. "The Mexican tells me that it is never allowed to die down save once in about fifty

Led to the Sacrifice

years. Then there is some ceremony, and a fire is kindled somewhere on the mountains outside the city. There is one of these horrible sacrifices too, and then the fire is sent in portions by means of flaming brands to every city under the Mexican sway. Then, if a fellow lives here there will be food and water, and perhaps a bed."

It was not long, indeed, before he came upon the latter, and presently discovered in an adjoining room a bin with bananas and the remains of a bird, which was probably a turkey. There was also an enormous jar containing water, and near at hand another with some liquid, which he afterwards learned was a native wine called pulque, used to this day throughout the country.

"Then we shall not starve," he said, with a feeling of satisfaction and with rising spirits. "I fancy we have little to grumble at, for this top of the temple is an excellent place to defend. We can see everything that is happening below, and stand high up, so that we can beat back the attackers. And we could drop things on them."

That set him thinking, and he went off at a run to join Tamba.

"Anything happening?" he asked brusquely.

The native shook his head.

"Then call me if there is. I am going to make arrangements for defence."

He ran to the chapel, where he found the priest sitting up, looking feeble, and talking in low tones to the captive noble. The latter rose at once, and bowed with the same signs of humility as before, while the other greeted Roger with a look which spoke of animosity and hatred.

Roger the Bold

"Give him the warning," said our hero, glancing at the priest. "Tell him that I will fling him to the ground below if he makes any attempt at escape. Then come with me. I have need of your service."

He stood at the door watching the priest, and noted his pallor as the news was given him. His looks of hostility were less marked, and for a moment it appeared as if he would ask for clemency from his captor. But Roger would not wait, and, beckoning to the noble, led the way across to the part where he had discovered food and drink. There were some heavy benches in one of the rooms, and an assortment of articles kept for the comfort of the priests, while outside stood three enormous stone bowls, filled with earth and scented blossoms, for the Mexicans were very fond of flowers.

"Lend a hand," said Roger, curtly. "Now push, and we will get this across to the stairs. After that we will barricade the entrance to this little place with the benches."

An hour later all was in readiness. The bowls, which were massive affairs, blocked the summit of the last flight of stairs, while their new quarters were more effectually guarded than had been the case when the idol stood in the way. The priest also had been removed to his new quarters, and so well had Roger's threats acted, as well as the remembrance of his strength and rough handling, that there seemed little doubt that the man would prove faithful and give no trouble. Roger and Tamba stood on the edge of the tower, looking down at the streets below, where there was less movement now. At their feet, and piled at intervals round the tower, were heaps of stones, or bricks,

Led to the Sacrifice

which they had wrenched from the sides of the smaller towers, for all were constructed of clay and earth, to which a facing of bricks had been added.

"They are fairly small, and one can throw them easily," explained Roger. "We will use them in case of attack, and I rather think that that will be as soon as darkness falls. If they win their way up the stairs we will stand behind the flower jars and strike at them with our swords. Fortunately we are now well supplied with arms."

"And there is food and drink too, as you tell me, master. We are fortunate. I begin to think that these Mexicans will do as their noble has done. They will change their minds, and will see in us valuable friends who can help them."

"Not till they have attacked again," said Roger, with assurance.

Nor did he prove to be mistaken, for as the dusk came, and it was no longer possible to see the lowest of the flights of steps, a movement was heard below.

"Men at the foot of the stairs," said Tamba, who had wonderful hearing. "They are coming."

Roger listened intently. Then he took an armful of bricks, and holding them against his chest with his left arm, began to hurl them down the side of the tower. He had carefully marked the spot to drop them from during the daylight, and now he had the satisfaction of hearing more than one clatter on the stairway. There was a sudden shriek and a scampering of many feet. After that, silence surrounded the tower, and though Tamba crept to the bottom, no one was to be seen. Then silence settled down upon the city, and the darkness became extreme. Nothing, in fact, could be seen save the

Roger the Bold

flare of a number of sacrificial fires, which blazed upon the altars perched upon the summit of every tower. The scene was weird, for occasionally a gust of wind would stir these flames, and they burned up brightly, allowing Roger and Tamba to obtain a glimpse of the streets and the courtyards below, and of the water which surrounded the city. Then all was blackness again, save for the fires and for the occasional figure of an attendant who replenished them.

"A good thought," said Roger. "Ours shall blaze too, and will perhaps help us to ward off danger. Throw some of the fuel on."

There was a pile of pine chippings close to the altar, and the native soon had the fire burning merrily. Then he rejoined Roger, bringing food and wine. They supped together contentedly, and having taken care to keep a careful eye on their prisoners till they were sure that they were to be trusted, they posted themselves on the summit of the stairs. Nothing happened for many hours, till Roger became drowsy. But Tamba's hand suddenly touched him, and he was alert at once.

"H-h-h-ush, master! They are coming!" he said. "I heard some one stumble and his arms clatter on the steps!"

The faithful fellow had made no mistake, for presently the soft murmur of many ascending feet came to the ear, and told the two that they were face to face with a second attack.

CHAPTER X

Roger at Bay

“CREEP to the fire and gently throw some wood on it,” whispered Roger in Tamba’s ear, as soon as he was sure that the enemy were coming. “Be careful that they do not see you against the light. I will wait here till you rejoin me; and recollect, when they advance make no movement till I give the word, or, rather, till you hear me throw one of the bricks. I shall rely on those to defeat them.”

The native went off into the darkness as if he were a ghost, and presently, as Roger looked, he saw that the flames were licking round the new fuel.

“The light will help us, while it will not show our figures,” he said to himself with a feeling of satisfaction, for it happened that one of the corner towers threw a deep shadow where he was. “Our best defence will be to act in silence. Our bricks ought to account for a few, and after that I have a method which may check them. Ah! they are coming rapidly, and Tamba will have to hurry. He is a long while away.”

A second or two later the native appeared at his side, or, rather, Roger knew he was there, for Tamba touched his arm. He had approached in absolute silence.

Roger the Bold

"They are on the last terrace below," he whispered in Roger's ear. "I heard them talking. The fire is built up, and will give a better light in a little while. I thought it would be well to look at the prisoners. They are asleep, master. We have no need to expect treachery from them."

"Then we shall be all the better able to defend this place. If we are rushed, we run to our new defence, while they will probably go to the chapel where the idol lies. Perhaps we might even descend during the darkness."

"We might, master; but there is a ring of sentries about us. I saw them as I watched. We are more secure up here than in any other place. Fortune has favoured us."

"Hist! They are nearer. Silence, and gather your bricks."

They leaned over the pile which they had accumulated close to the top of the steps, and filled an arm. Then, with one ready in their hands, and a sufficient space between them to give ample room for throwing, they waited. By now the fire had commenced to burn up a little, and the flames illuminated the top of the stairs feebly, showing the big jars of earth. Roger watched them, and heard whispering, for the Mexicans had also seen the obstruction. Then a man's head squeezed between two of them, while his body slowly wriggled its way through the narrow opening. A second appeared at another, while a third, a venturesome fellow, clambered round the outside margin of the one which stood on the very border of the steps. A slip of the hand, a toppling of the jar, would have sent him into space, with a fall of some hundreds of

Roger at Bay

feet below him. Roger lifted his arm, aimed for the central man, and launched his brick. There was a dull thud, a shriek—more of fear than of pain—and the Mexican withdrew. Then Tamba attempted the same, and with equal fortune, his brick glancing from the man's back and clattering down the stairs. As yet not a sound other than the shriek had come from either of the combatants. But now a voice was heard. Some one gave a sharp order, and at once an attempt was made to repeat the process of wriggling through, while, on the side nearest to the centre of the tower, arms encircled the jar, and an effort was made to remove it. But Roger frustrated the attempt, a well-aimed brick crashing against one of the arms, and breaking it as if it had been a stick. Meanwhile Tamba had pelted the others, and had caused them to withdraw.

"They are talking again," whispered Roger, as he crouched in the darkness. "We will remain here till they attempt to remove the jars, and then we will use our swords. Make no noise, but cut at them with all your strength. If they become dangerous, wait for my shout, and then do what I order."

There was a lull for some few minutes, while the ever-brightening fire permitted the defenders to see that no one was at their obstruction. But down below an occasional dusky figure could be observed, while there was the dull sound of whispered conversation, and a click now and again as a club or sword struck the masonry. Suddenly there was silence again, and Roger nudged Tamba.

"A sure warning," he whispered. "Get your sword ready. But one second. Can they possibly reach us in any other way?"

Roger the Bold

"It is out of the question, master. The walls are steep and smooth, and there is no one to lower a rope. We have only the stairs to defend."

"Then I have little fear. If I were unarmed I could hold them, I think, unless they came prepared to cut us down. That would be different."

It would indeed have made a vast amount of difference, and would nearly certainly have led to capture or death. But these Mexicans had a blind faith in their war god and other deities, and groaned under a system of superstition which the priests took good care to keep alive. It would have been far easier, and far better for themselves, to fling themselves against these foreigners with their best arms, and cut them down by sheer advantage of numbers. But their superstition taught them that a sacrifice was needed, that prisoners should not be slain in battle, but merely taken with as little hurt as possible, so that they might be afterwards offered to their idols. And now that they had a huge and strange opponent to deal with, one who fought with his hands in a manner which none had ever seen, they still adhered to their practice, determining to take him alive. It gave Roger and his comrade an enormous advantage—an advantage which they needed, however, even though they held such a commanding position. For the Mexicans had the numbers. Life was of no consequence, and they were prepared to throw away many of their fighting men to attain their object. The insult to their deities lent added desperation to their attack, and when they advanced up the stairs again it was with the determination to conquer. They found on the upper side of the barrier a young giant filled with

Roger at Bay

equal determination, prepared to seize his enemies, and, if he were surrounded and capture imminent, to drag them all by sheer force to the edge of the tower, and there hurl himself and his captors to the court below. Yes; let the reader imagine himself in a similar predicament, and he may realize to some small degree the desperate valour with which Roger was filled, and the reckless thoughts which flowed through his mind. "Anything is better than that hideous altar and the sacrifice," he told himself; and he prepared to act up to the thought.

But the Mexicans were advancing, and a shout rang out from the stairs below. It was answered from every quarter of the city, telling the defenders that thousands were waiting to learn the issue, and to praise their comrades if successful. There was movement on the towers all round, seen by the aid of the fires, while a murmur came from the courts below.

"Waiting for us," said Roger, grimly. "We will give them work to do before we are taken. Now, prepare."

The shuffle of feet was heard on the bricked steps, and soon a number of figures appeared behind the jars. But on this occasion there was no waiting, The Mexicans commenced to creep between them, while others were hoisted by their comrades and clambered over the top. They were met with a fusillade of bricks, which hardly deterred them. Then Roger and Tamba silently leapt forward from their dark nook behind the smaller tower, and fell on the enemy with the native swords. The sound of their blows could be easily heard at first, but in a minute the air was filled with shrieks and cries,

Roger the Bold

while a hoarse roar came from the streets below. Three men fell in as many seconds to their blows, while Roger contrived to stun one of the enemy who was clambering over the obstacle, dropping him like a stone on the very top, where he hung amidst the flowers. But others followed, and soon it was clear that the rush would succeed.

"They are getting too strong for us," gasped Roger, during a short pause. "We will try once more, and then if not successful we will upset the jars. When I shout, place your foot against the one before you, and push with all your strength. It will topple over, and in the confusion we will rush down upon them. Fists will then be better than swords, and I shall make use of mine just as I did before."

He had hardly time for the words before the enemy came on again. Their shouts were deafening, while there was little doubt that their courage was increased by the clamour of their friends below. This time they swarmed over the huge vases of flowers, and threatened to overcome the two defenders before they could strike them down. The time for further action had arrived even sooner than Roger had anticipated, and with a shout he gave the order.

Cutting fiercely at the enemy, he made a path for himself, while his free arm clutched one of the men who was in the act of clambering over. Then his foot went up to the jar, and he threw all his weight downward. The thing toppled over, and then suddenly bounded down the steps, followed by the one which Tamba had taken in hand. But that was not sufficient. Roger moved to the third, and sent it flying. Then he threw his sword over his shoulders,

Roger at Bay

and leapt down the steps. But there was no need for him to strike at a single Mexican, for fierce though these men were, and doughty fighters as they had proved themselves to be when opposed to the Spaniards, the sight of Roger brought fear to their minds, and his extraordinary methods of warfare astounded them. They were nonplussed and disheartened, and this last measure of defence cowed them. Indeed, fortune on this dark night had been on the side of those who held the steps, and the very vases aided them. Toppling over, they bounded down the steps, carrying some of the men with them. But the last struck against an edge, and fractured into pieces, the earth and the plants being shot out into the enemy. In an instant Roger picked up the larger pieces, and flung them after the Mexicans, while Tamba raced back for an armful of bricks, and hurled them down the steps. There was a series of loud bangs, a chorus of shrieks, and the Mexicans were gone, their flight being accelerated by the missiles which the two above poured upon their heads. Indeed, once they had reached the court below they raced to their houses, saying that the white man, the giant who had come amongst them, was a god in no way less than their own deities.

“That ends the trouble for to-night,” said Roger, with a hearty laugh, for he was beginning to regain his assurance, and numbers no longer troubled him as they had done a few hours before. “We can sit down and rest, and, by the way, I think I am hungry.”

“Then I will fetch food and water, master. Sit here till I return. I will go to our lodgings quietly,

Roger the Bold

for it will be as well to see how our prisoners are behaving.”

He was gone like a ghost again, for this native, accustomed from his childhood to hunting and life in the forest, and being barefooted, could pass from one spot to another without so much as a sound. Indeed, Roger had already learned much from him, for he had watched his methods in the forest, when he himself was too weak to do much more than stand or sit. Tamba had an eagle-like glance, an eye which detected everything and allowed nothing to pass. Even when creeping through the underwood in search of an enemy, he seemed to see the path at his knees as well as the forest ahead, and, as if intuitively, felt and removed the sticks and thorns in his way. It was an easy matter, therefore, for him to cross the tiled summit of the tower, and no one heard him, not even the prisoners, though the sound of the conflict had rendered them alert. Tamba crept to the new quarters which Roger had selected, and stared in cautiously. He found the noble diligently talking to the priest, and the latter nodding. As the native entered they both looked up, and it was plain from their innocent expressions that they had not been plotting.

“You have been successful again?” asked the noble. “Then I am glad,” he added, as Tamba nodded; “for it is as well that my countrymen should learn soon that it is useless to fight with such a man. He bears a charmed life, and is truly a great lord, greater even than this Malinche (the native word for Cortes). Tell me, have many fallen, have many lost their lives?”

“None, I believe. We beat them back with

Roger at Bay

swords and bricks. Many are hurt, but they will not die."

"I am glad," was the simple answer; "for then the people will be all the more ready to forgive, to forget the fighting, and accept this young lord as a friend. Did they but know the use that he will be to our arms, they would long ago have welcomed him with shouts of joy. But they thought him a Spaniard, just as I did, and the priest here also, and those we do not spare. Tell me how you met with this lord, and how it is that you are his servant."

Tamba hastened to tell the story, while he gathered food and took a bowl full of water.

"I will send my lord," he said, "and he will discuss this matter with you. He will be glad to talk."

A little later he appeared at Roger's side, and told him what had occurred.

"They are desirous of making peace," he said, beating his hands together to show his delight. "The priest thinks now that you are a mighty man, even as I do, my lord. Go to them. I said that you would come and talk this matter over. Perhaps when the morning comes our danger will have passed, and we shall become the friends of the Mexicans."

The news was excellent, almost too good to be true, and the relief to Roger was immense. He gulped down the food hastily, and emptied the bowl at a draught. Then he waited while Tamba went for a second supply, and having seen him posted at the head of the stairs, and given strict orders to him that he was to patrol round the terrace and watch every side, he slipped off to the

Roger the Bold

little chamber in which the two Mexicans were seated, and pushed the curtain aside. Then he clambered over the forms which had been placed to barricade the door, and was in the act of seating himself when the noble and the priest rose to their feet. The latter had hunted out a tiny oil lamp, and this afforded sufficient light to show their features. Roger noticed with a thrill that the priest no longer scowled, and rubbed his elbows, as if to remind himself of his injuries. He made a deep obeisance, and spoke gravely.

“He says that you are a god, and that after this he will obey your wishes,” said the noble. “He speaks the words which I also think. Surely you are a god, a different man from these others who have come here to hunt us for our gold, and to take us into captivity.”

“Tell him that I thank him, and am glad that he is prepared to be friendly,” said Roger, simply, motioning them to be seated, while he threw himself on a lounge on which the priest on duty was wont to rest. “Say, however, that I am no god; that there is but one God, the ruler of the whole earth.”

The noble nodded and repeated the words, at which the priest looked pleased. Then they chatted together for a little while.

“It is as we thought,” said the noble at length. “This Malinche has come to us with a new religion, and holds these gods of ours in scorn. He would do with them as he has done with those of another race close to the sea coast, and would force us to adopt his religion, even at the point of his lances. But we wait conviction, and we also have something

Roger at Bay

of this religion ; for listen, Roger." He pronounced the word in a strange accent, and looked our hero earnestly in the eyes. " We also know that there is one God, who cares for all, whoever they may be, but we also believe that there are others under Him. We worship them, and offer sacrifices to them because we can see their images. The idols are before us, while this other God is invisible. We do honour to Him through these images which we have put on the towers, and we also pay respect to the sun. Let these Spaniards prove that this is wrong, and we will listen to their arguments. But we will not be forced into a belief which we do not really feel. Let them show that these sacrifices are wrong."

" They are detestable!" said Roger, with decision, facing the two. " They are undoubtedly cruel and wrong, and some of you will live to believe that. But I cannot talk of these matters. I say that I am not a god, and that I am not a Spaniard. I came to these parts with comrades, at the bidding of a mighty king, and I hoped to obtain wealth. Yes, I admit that we hoped to gain gold and jewels, but not by force, except from the Spaniards. They opposed us from the first, and fought us. For that we are right, if we attack them in return. As for the land, it should be a fine thing for Mexico if Englishmen governed it."

" Perhaps it will come to that, Roger, but we will speak of yourself, though in spite of your words we believe that you are some powerful lord, a noble in your own land, if not a god, who has come to aid us at this critical time. When the morning comes we will speak to the people and to

Roger the Bold

our king. We ask whether you will trust us to descend and meet our comrades?"

"You can go," said Roger, promptly, for they had already proved their intention to be faithful. "I will trust you, and will look for your return. I captured you so that you might remain in my hands as hostages."

"And we will return to you for that reason, my lord. We will set out when the sun has risen, and will come to you again before the day falls. And we will send food and water to you, and clothes to replace your own. Yes, it would be better that you should don our dress," he added, "for then there will be nothing to remind us of these hated enemies. Ah, you wonder why I speak the tongue, and I will tell you. Perhaps I have done my nation a service by doing so, however."

"It has proved my salvation," answered Roger, warmly. "But how did you learn? Tell me when you first met these Spaniards, and what has happened."

"Wait till the dawn comes, my lord," answered the noble; "then I will speak. You have need of sleep, and will do well to take it. To-morrow, if my words are received, you will go to the king, and he will show you honour. Then the people will shout and follow you to your quarters. Have no fear. You can sleep as if you were surrounded by friends."

Roger thanked him, and rose to rejoin Tamba. He found the latter softly patrolling the terrace, and listened to his report.

"Not a man to be seen except on the towers, where priests have replenished the fires. The city is quiet, and no one else is stirring."

Roger at Bay

"Then we will take turns to sleep," said Roger. "I am tired with the fight, and will lie down now. Wake me in two hours, and I will relieve you. After that it will be morning, and let us hope that it will dawn brightly for us."

He paced round the terrace, and then, satisfied that all was quiet, stretched himself on the tiles. He was an old campaigner now, for even a matter of three months roughing it makes a man accept hardships as trifles. Roger had slept in many strange places since he sailed from England, and a bed beneath the trees of the forest, or on the deck of the brigantine, or on these hard tiles, came as welcome to him as would a feather mattress at home. It was therefore only a few minutes before his heavy breathing told that he was asleep. Nor did he move till Tamba came to his side and shook him.

"The dawn is breaking clear and bright, my lord," he said. "It is time to rise and take a meal."

"But I meant to watch. I said that I would relieve you," exclaimed our hero, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "You were tired too. Why did you not rouse me earlier?"

"You had done all the fighting and were worn out, master," was the simple answer. "I am used to watching throughout the night, and the loss of sleep is nothing to me. You require your strength, and it is better that you should rest, better for yourself, for you are stronger to fight, and better also for me, because then you are able to protect me."

The argument silenced Roger, though he did not forget. But it was only another method by which the native showed his devotion. He was a faithful

Roger the Bold

fellow, who lived to serve this humble crossbow youth, and he seemed to anticipate every want. Indeed, when Roger had risen from the tiles he found a meal of bananas and a bowl of water beside him, and in spite of the food he had taken during the night, fell upon it hungrily. Then he went to the edge of the terrace and stared out at the city of Mexico, tracing its boundaries and marking the viaducts which led to its heart, and the aqueducts which brought clear water to the townspeople, for the lake about the walls was salt and unfit for drinking purposes. We will leave him there for a little while, for this city was sufficiently beautiful in these days to attract the eye by the hour together. Indeed, it was a second Venice, rivalling that magnificent city by the water, and justly laying claim to being the finest and the most beautiful city the world could produce. Nor has a better ever been built since old Mexico disappeared.

Let us now return to the coast for a little while and see what fortune had befallen Fernando Cortes after he had sailed from Tabasco, bringing with him the native woman, Marina, for that was the name given to this slave when she was baptized by the Spaniards. The reader will remember that Cortes disembarked at a port to which he gave the name of St. Juan de Ulua, and that there he met with a friendly reception from the natives, and also received envoys from the great king Montezuma, ruler of the wide provinces over which the Mexicans held sway. He will recollect also that this king sent rich gifts, while forbidding the strangers to come nearer to his city, and that, for his own reasons, Cortes defied the order, and determined to go; for to have retired

Roger at Bay

to Cuba would have meant his ruin, he already having disobeyed orders. Now he showed the firm material of which he was made, and also displayed no small amount of astuteness. For it happened that tales began to filter into the Spanish camp, telling of the huge armies of the Mexicans, and of their ferocity in warfare. These had their effect in time, and it is not to be wondered at that some of the soldiers under Cortes began to have fears. Not all had his reasons for not turning back. They could come again, and no punishment or disgrace awaited them in Cuba. And at length the camp became broken into two factions, one of which went with their leader, while the other clamoured for retreat.

Had Cortes declined to listen to these men it is possible that he would have made many enemies, and that more would have urged the retreat. But he shewed his astuteness by hearing what they had to say and agreeing to go if they so wished. He even prepared for the embarkation, while he secretly set his own faction to work to point out the gold and wealth to be obtained, and to hold before the soldiers the honours they would win. The plot proved successful, so that at length the malcontents approached him again and urged him to remain. It is needless to tell how he demurred as if he himself wished to leave, and how at length the crafty leader consented to march on, providing his actions were duly set down on paper for the information of those at home. He declared the conditions of the expedition altered, and had a new set of rules drawn up. Then, having shifted his base a little higher up the coast to a port to which was given the name of Vera Cruz,

Roger the Bold

he stripped the ships of their canvas and cordage and of all that they possessed in the way of guns and stores, and had them destroyed. He burnt his boats behind him, made escape impossible, and left death or victory alone to stare his men in the face. Never was there a more reckless or a more astute action, reckless because of his paucity of numbers and the overwhelming armies of the enemy, and astute because there was now no turning back, there was no retreating; the only course was a forward one, in the direction of Mexico.

And now to tell briefly how it happened that circumstances played into the hands of the adventurer, Fernando Cortes. It has already been told how the Mexicans were accustomed to battle with their neighbours with the sole object of obtaining prisoners who would serve as a sacrifice to their hideous deities, and how these fierce fighters entered the struggle with the intention of killing as few as possible and of capturing many. Their opponents very naturally did all that was possible to slay the Mexicans and escape. They themselves were not so addicted to the human sacrifice as were the men of Mexico, and the fate of the prisoners naturally made them fight with ferocity. But Mexico was strong. She had for very many years had a triple alliance, and her two allies were the Tezcucans and the small kingdom of Tlacopan, all at that time situated in the valley in which the lakes lay. When first this alliance was formed none of the three states was at all strong, and there was another race which dominated them. But the three together, once they had settled their differences and made friends, became a very powerful force, so much so

Roger at Bay

that they soon conquered this other race, and subjected it entirely. That done, they went to war with all the other states in the valley—for this fertile spot was thickly populated—and subjected their enemies, when they began to go farther afield, so much so that Mexico claimed a kingdom stretching from Atlantic to Pacific. Her numerous vassal states paid her tribute in specie and in slaves, and human toll was taken of all to satisfy their morbid craving for sacrificing.

It was at this juncture, when the taxes imposed were becoming too burdensome, when the same melancholy was beginning to settle down upon these remoter states, that Fernando Cortes and his ridiculously small force arrived, and making friends with the Cempoalans, a coast tribe of large proportions, advised them to refuse their usual tribute. He set them an example by seizing Montezuma's collectors. That done he determined to check the abominable practice of human sacrifice, which the Cempoalans indulged in to a minor degree. He raided their temples and destroyed their divinities, and when they would have rushed to arms and attacked him, he seized their cacique and the chiefs, and threatened to kill them if there was trouble. That pacified them, for the Cempoalans were beginning to feel as much respect for this strong man who had so unexpectedly come amongst them as they had felt for centuries for their gods. They fell in with his wishes, white-washed their temples, removed all trace of sacrifice, and set up crosses. Then their own priests took charge of the new temples. Finally, he received the nation of Cempoalans as vassals to the king of Spain, a king whose orders, given through his

Roger the Bold

governor of Cuba, he himself had directly disregarded.

He was now in possession of allies, and set off for Mexico. His first march was to Tlascala, where he met with much opposition, and at one time had some hundred and fifty thousand adversaries confronting him. But his horses and the superior armour of his men, together with the supernatural power with which he and all from Spain were now accredited, aided him in defeating them, and in a little while he induced these people to become his allies.

His next march was to Cholula, far down in the valley, where he learned, by the help of Marina, that there was a plot afoot whereby twenty thousand Mexicans were to fall upon his troops in the streets. Cortes took means to punish the people summarily, and no sooner had he made his preparations, than he and his men attacked the Cholulans, and massacred very many. It was a cruel and a severe lesson, and it helped to bring home to all the valley the fact that a troublesome time was come, and that the strangers were likely to prove strong. Indeed, Fernando Cortes behaved as if he had an army of many thousands, and as if he were aware that none could stay his march. His astuteness had gained for him huge numbers of allies, but these were still insufficient to quell the nation of Mexicans, who would be joined by their allies. However, the Spaniard did not falter. He had declared that he would march to Mexico, and see this Montezuma and his riches, and march he did, right to the city, passing through many towns of larger dimensions than any to be seen in Spain, and seeing buildings and streets, the like of which he and his men had

Roger at Bay

never even imagined. Then, too, on every side there were signs of industry going hand-in-hand with this hideous sacrifice of human beings. Every foot of earth was carefully tilled, houses were well and securely built, and the tribes were governed in the most orderly manner. They had their priests, their judges, and their officers of the crown. Then, too, they had their historians, for though the Mexicans knew no alphabet, they put down their meaning by signs and pictures, and there was a college for the training of picture writers, an art now entirely lost. In fact, Cortes had arrived in a country where dwelt a marvellous people, infinitely more civilized than he could have expected, and particularly when compared with the natives of Cuba and adjacent isles. And these tribes had beautiful cities, excellent houses, an almost perfect administration, and a system of labour which provided work for all. There were no beggars, and all lived and fared well. In fact, luxuries were common throughout the land ruled over by Montezuma, while it is reported of that monarch that he dined off fresh fish, received within twenty-four hours of the catching, from a port two hundred miles away. It may be wondered how such a thing was possible, when no animal of any description was used for work. But the system of runners or couriers before alluded to made the matter possible, and helped to prove to Cortes that these Mexicans were indeed a wonderful nation.

The Spaniards entered Mexico peacefully, and were received by Montezuma and by his people with awe, for now another circumstance came to help them. It happened that among the superstitions

Roger the Bold

of the race was one concerning the god of air, called Quetzalcoatl, who was supposed to be chiefly instrumental in teaching the arts of metal-working, the methods of good government, and many other matters which aided in keeping the state successful and prosperous. This god had disappeared; it was said he had gone to the coast, to the Gulf of Mexico, and had there taken his place in a skiff made of serpents' skins. He had sailed away, promising to return with his descendants. Report said of him that he was tall, had a white skin and a flowing beard, with long hair over his shoulders. What wonder if this superstitious nation took Fernando for the god of air, and received him with joy! He had shown his superiority by disobeying the orders of Montezuma, a fact sufficient to declare him a superior being. He was white, and if not tall, he was moderately so. The description fitted the Spanish leader sufficiently well, while Mexican superstition and the chatter of the priests did the rest. Fernando was received with joy. Thousands of richly-dressed nobles crossed the viaduct to meet him, while Montezuma even came some way to do him honour. Quarters were assigned to the force, while their allies remained within call outside the city. Cortes had accomplished his desire; he had come to Mexico, and we shall learn in due course how his boldness was rewarded.

CHAPTER XI

News of Fernando Cortes

ROGER DE LUCE sat on the terrace of the great temple, where dwelt the fierce and remorseless god of war, and looked down upon Mexico, the delightful city nestling on the bosom of the lake. From his elevated perch he could command every cranny, see the outline of the enormous square dedicated to the priests, the huge palace in which the king lived, and the market. Then he followed the orderly streets, noticing that some had broad pavements, while some were composed of canals communicating with the lake, while yet others had pathway and canal, allowing the foot passengers to chat with those in the skiffs. Thousands of the latter were about, plying amongst the houses or on the lake. From the roof-tops came the smoke of many a fire, mingling with that from the altars. And the gardens were a delight. They stretched on every roof, scarlet, and pink, and mauve, and the finest green. They floated on the water of the lake—actually floated—for the Mexicans loved their flowers, and made up for lack of space by tying withies together, and covering them with reeds and earth. These were anchored in the lake, and arranged as gardens.

Roger the Bold

Roger could even catch the sparkle of the water as it flowed through the aqueducts on its way from the country outside, and was marvelling at the ingenuity displayed in bringing it to the city in this manner, when some one touched his shoulder, and he turned to find the priest and the noble. Both bowed low, as before, casting their eyes down as he looked at them.

“We ask you to fulfil your promise,” said the latter. “It is time that some one went to the people, and we propose that the priest should first descend. Later on, when he has returned to this spot, I will go to the king, and he will come to do you honour. He, too, will see his mistake. We shall all be glad to admit that we have placed this Malinché in the wrong position. That he is no god of air as we thought. We shall rejoice that you have come at such a time to help us.”

He bowed again, while the priest followed his action with the utmost humility. Roger stamped his foot and flushed with vexation.

“It is hard luck that I should be treated with more bobs and curtsies than King Harry at home,” he said in English. “No matter how often I repeat it, these fellows will take me for one of their gods. I suppose it is the result of being so tall.”

It was undoubtedly partly due to that, for Roger overtopped any one in Mexico. But Nature had given him a pleasant appearance and much courage, all of which played upon the imagination of the people. Then none had ever seen such a combat as had taken place on the previous evening. It seemed incredible that one so young could oppose so many. The success of the defence and the novel methods

News of Fernando Cortes

employed had convinced the Mexican priest that Roger was the god of air, the very one who was supposed to have returned in the person of Fernando Cortes. And the supposition explained why Roger was an enemy of the Spaniards. The latter had proved cruel and grasping, and had long ago shown that they were impostors, and had nothing to do with the god of air. Then this Roger must be he; and the priest prepared to descend and tell the people.

"They will believe me," he said to the noble. "There can be no doubt. This youth has no fear. When danger comes he stands to his full height, and watches. None could drag him to the ground, while at the touch of his hand men fell with a crash. We must show our friendship, for there is now no mistake. Have I his permission to go?"

"He will trust you. You will return when you have spoken, and then I will go to the palace. Have you anything to say before you leave?"

"Nothing, save that I crave the pardon of this gallant youth."

The priest evidently meant every word. He had been brought up in the precincts of the temple, and superstition was engrafted in his mind. It was, therefore, only natural that he should think of Roger as he did, and ask for his pardon. The noble repeated the words and the request.

"Tell him there is nothing to forgive on my side, but that I am sorry if I hurt him. Ask him how he feels, and whether I did much damage."

"He is well," was the answer. "He has no pain, and was well punished. He may go."

The priest gathered his black garments about

Roger the Bold

him and hobbled to the steps, for despite his assertion to the contrary he still felt the effects of the toss which our young giant had given him. Then he disappeared from sight, to be seen again as he gradually circled the tower in his descent.

"Men are coming to meet him, and they are shamefaced," said the noble, looking over the edge. "There will be sorrow in Mexico when the full tale is learned, and afterwards there will be rejoicing. Will my lord eat? I will stand beside him, and any question that he may care to ask I will answer."

Roger had already satisfied his appetite, but his hunger for news was far from appeased, and for long he kept the noble beside him, telling him the names of the streets and of the town at various parts of the lakes. Then he suddenly turned and reminded him of his promise of the previous evening.

"Where are these Spaniards?" he asked. "You have said that they came to Mexico. Then where are they now, for I see no sign of them in the city."

"You can see traces of their going, my lord. Look there, and there also."

The noble took Roger's arm and attracted his attention to the causeway.

"Watch the line of the masonry and trace it to the bank from the heart of the city," he said. "Can you not see that it is broken, and that men are now labouring to repair the injury? That is where the fight took place. Yes, my lord, we showed them at length that we could fight, and we drove them out. Many lie beneath the water, or are covered by the fallen bricks, while their allies were slain in thousands."

"Then there has been a battle?" exclaimed

News of Fernando Cortes

Roger, in astonishment, for he had had no information. "And you have defeated the Spaniards?"

"Defeated them and driven them beyond the valley. We took them for gods at first. Their boldness amazed us, and the late king Montezuma had faith in them. He was too good and too kind, and these men preyed upon him. They induced him to swear vassalage to their own king, and afterwards took him to the quarters which he had prepared for them, saying that they would hold him as hostage. And we lived close at hand and did not move."

The announcement almost took our hero's breath away. It seemed incredible that four or five hundred strangers with their native allies could dare to do such a thing. And yet it had actually occurred. This Fernando Cortes had already showed both boldness and astuteness, and when in Mexico he displayed both qualities. He took advantage of Mexican superstition, to which the whole nation were abject slaves, and he actually persuaded Montezuma, a king who was feared by millions of subjects and vassals, to declare himself a vassal of a king whom he had never seen, and to come to the Spanish quarters as a hostage for the safety of the Spaniards, or on some such feeble excuse. Such boldness was almost ludicrous; it was impudence. But we have to remember the circumstances, and that a Western nation were here treating with a people who had never heard of Europe, and to whom their own religion was of supreme importance.

"Yes," continued the noble bitterly, "we lived at hand and did not stir; we made no effort to bring him back. But let me give you my name. I am

Roger the Bold

Teotlili, and was selected at the first to act as envoy to these strangers. I went to the coast at the order of Montezuma to meet these men, and from my intercourse with them, and my conversation with Marina, their woman slave, I learned to speak the language. For they remained on the coast for a long time, founding their town of Vera Cruz. It was there that I took them a number of presents, amongst them the image of the sun, which was composed of pure gold."

Roger pricked up his ears. "Had it a sketch of this city on one side and the sun on the other?" he demanded.

"You know it—you have heard the tale then?" exclaimed Teotlili, in astonishment. "How is that, then? I thought that the matter was almost a secret. But then I am forgetting. It is only to be expected that you should have heard."

Roger was mystified. "Heard what?" he demanded hotly. "I know about the disc of course, for it brought me and my friends out to this part; and I have seen the sketch of the city. It seems exact."

"You have seen it. Then where?" demanded the noble, showing unusual excitement. "Tell me, my lord, where was it that you saw the disc?"

"In England first of all, and recently within fifty miles, or perhaps a little more, of Mexico. It was sent home to Spain by Fernando Cortes, this Malinché, as you call him, and some men of another nation, captured the ship, and were in turn captured by our sailors. The disc came into possession of one of the sailors who came here with us, and it was the sight of it, and the news of

News of Fernando Cortes

discoveries, and of gold in these parts, that brought about the formation of our expedition and our sailing here. I told you that I was no god. I am a simple crossbow man, and can fight if driven to it. Like the Spaniards, we desire riches; but we shall not take them from you in such a manner. We do not desire to destroy your city, though if you care to form an alliance with our king you can do so. Our main purpose out here is to obtain gold and jewels, to return home with a rich harvest."

"Could you give anything in return? Could you get comrades to aid us, or give us your own help? My lord, we need a leader—a cacique. We are not skilled in the class of fighting practised by these Spaniards. Their horses overcome us, and their lances kill before we can get to close quarters. Then who can sever the tough material of which their clothing is made? It is of some metal which breaks our swords, and turns aside every blow!"

For a little while the noble looked closely at Roger, and it was obvious that he was thinking. Then he began to speak again, earnestly, and in low tones, so that Tamba could not hear.

"Would you fight for us?" he asked. "As I have said, we need a leader who knows these Spanish methods, and we are prepared to give a handsome reward to any one who can help us, and who will accept the post of cacique or chief. You can fight. Have you not proved it to us? Have you not faced us all boldly, and beaten us too? Then will you help, and in return you shall have a prize which will amply repay? Yes, if successful, enough gold and jewels shall be given to you to make you and your friends rich for life, and to

Roger the Bold

require a hundred men to carry to the coast ; while if the Spaniards get the better of us and drive us from this fair city, our stores of gold will be useless to us, and you can have all that there is. But you must produce the disc of gold. For listen——”

He moistened his lips, while Roger sat forward, staring at him in amazement, while the thought and the mention of riches led him to wonder how his friends were faring, and whether it would not be possible to bring them to Mexico. Failing that, he would endeavour to earn this reward, and take back to the brigantine a sufficient sum to make the voyage a success, and to satisfy all parties concerned with its preparation. Suddenly the noble interrupted him as he was puzzling about the disc, and wondering what it could have to do with the treasure.

“You must produce this disc,” he said quietly, lifting a finger to impress his words. “But to tell you why, I must relate more of these adventurers who came to us, domineered here, and captured our king—the wise and gentle Montezuma. They asked for gold, and were given an enormous pile, amounting to a fortune in their own country, so Marina has told me. But they demanded more, and we had none to give ; for listen again, my lord, this disc commands the key to the treasury. We have little or no need of gold or jewels in this country, and we prize them most as ornaments. They do not pass as money, as with these Spaniards, for our currency is composed of maize and cocoa-beans. For very many years different races have lived in this beautiful valley, and they have gathered gold, some from the valley alone, while many have collected it from the states in the province which we now

News of Fernando Cortes

control. Thus, for seven hundred years, as you people speak of time, and even perhaps for longer, the treasure has been increasing. We who are Aztecs found it here when we came two hundred years ago, and we have gathered a hoard in that time. Of our store we set aside enough for all needs, and the remainder was secreted by the priests, for the day may come when Mexico may need more. Our customs may change, and it might happen that gold would take the place of the cocoa-bean. The fact remains that the priests stored away a huge treasure, and that they alone knew of its whereabouts. So that none should tamper with the hoard, the priest to whom it was handed, and who died more than a hundred years ago, caused a plan to be made in gold, so that those who followed might know of the spot. The plan was engraved on a disc, on which was also an image of the sun, such as our metal-workers are in the habit of making, and the disc was handed down from one priest to another. Now listen carefully to the end of this tale. In his generosity of heart Montezuma sent rich presents with me to the coast, so as to pacify these marauders, though instead the gold attracted them. The priests prepared the gifts, and arranged for the bearers, for their duties in the city are many. Somehow, I know not in what manner, this very disc was included, and handed by me to Malinché. You say that that disc was captured twice, and that it returned here to the country. Surely that is a marvellous happening! And if your friends possess it you will be able to recover it from them. Then the priest who has the secret, and can read the picture, will tell where the treasure is, and you will

Roger the Bold

be given the reward. All seems to work favourably for our ends."

"But the disc is not in our possession," exclaimed Roger, aghast at the calamity which had happened to him when it had been stolen by Alvarez. "We picked up a Spaniard on the way out, and he stole it from me. Look, here is the treacherous wound he dealt me."

He bared his shoulder and showed the scar where the dagger had entered.

"We treated him as a friend and a comrade," he said bitterly, "and he repaid us in this manner. He has the disc now, and for aught I know is with his comrades. This Malinché, as you call him, must have heard of the disc and its secret, and he offered a reward. This fellow will have sought it already."

"If he has not kept the disc and the fact that he has it from his comrades, my lord," said Teotlili. "He might have done that. These Spaniards live for gold, as I can swear, for I saw many here die for it. They sacrificed their lives by carrying a weight of it when, had they been free of the burden, they might have lived. This man—a crafty and unscrupulous cheat, I should esteem him—will think not of the reward for the disc, but of the riches which the secret may bring him. He will hide it, and when the Spaniards come here again, as they will, I am assured, he will endeavour to worm out the secret, and discover the treasure. Then, as the first-comer, he will have the choice, and since jewels are more valuable than gold, and lighter to bear, he might within an hour secure more wealth than all these comrades of his put together. He must be captured,

News of Fernando Cortes

my lord. Upon his death and the return of the disc depends your reward."

"Then I will take him," answered Roger, quietly, after a few moments' silence. "I have sworn to punish him for the treacherous blow he dealt me, and now that I hear of the importance of the disc, I will redouble my efforts; for I do not desire this reward so much for myself as for the ship's company, and for those who sent us out. It is only right that we should do all that is possible to repay them, and any wealth that we may obtain will be divided. But, in any case, until I can return to my comrades I shall help you to prepare for the Spaniards. Let all this excitement die down, and an assurance be given me that no attempt will be made to sacrifice me, or Tamba, and I will help. I would wish also that your people would promise never to kill one human being for the sake of those hideous idols."

The noble looked pained for a few seconds, while he stared out at the city.

"We have been brought up from childhood to this belief," he said sadly, "and we cannot break ourselves of it all in a moment. If it is wrong, and we are shown so clearly, then as sensible beings we shall change, and for myself I shall be glad. For there is constant bloodshed here. The altar reeks of it, and we never know when our dearest and best will be summoned. But we will not be driven. These Spaniards have done with us what no others would have dared to attempt. They took Montezuma as a hostage, while we knew him only as a powerful king, swaying the people from here for many miles, till the sea is reached on either hand. We dared not look into his face, but always turned

Roger the Bold

our eyes to the wall. And these barbarians came and took him. Then they gathered the gold, and, having our chief and head, ruled us. They cast our idols down from the towers, and ordered that there should be no more sacrifice. Then this Malinché went to the coast; for it happened that eighteen ships arrived, bearing a second expedition. While he was gone, his lieutenant attacked us treacherously, and we drove him and his followers into their quarters. Then Malinché returned, and we continued to fight, till our unhappy king fell at the discharge of our arrows. We slew many of the Spaniards and their allies, and we never left them at peace for a moment. Our arrows flew over their quarters day and night, while our labourers broke down the viaducts so that none could come or go, and no food or water reach the garrison. Look, my lord, there, where the men are now at work, is the spot where the viaduct was cut."

He pointed to a spot to which he had previously drawn Roger's attention, while the latter noticed that not only was this viaduct under repair, but that others also had been damaged. In fact, Cortes had barely returned in time. His call to the coast had been an urgent one, for the reader must remember that he was already in danger himself from the party in authority at Cuba. He was to all intents and purposes a political offender awaiting arrest, and this expedition had come to take the command from him, and to snatch the fruits of his hard work and daring. That was hardly suitable, and Cortes having first sent secret gifts to the soldiers, fell upon the troops in the darkness of night, captured their cannon, and those who were his opponents. At

News of Fernando Cortes

that the remainder went over to his side, and agreed to follow him as leader. Then he returned to Mexico to find the natives risen and his troops surrounded.

“We fought so fiercely, and hemmed them in so closely, that they were like to starve or die of thirst,” continued Teotlili. “They were outnumbered by many thousands, and at length they stole away in the darkness, carrying their treasure with them. That was our opportunity. Our soldiers crowded the viaduct, and our men were everywhere on the lake in their boats. We clutched them and dragged them beneath the water. Some we upset, and the weight of gold dragged them down, while others lost their lives at the spot where we had broken the bridges or the masonry. We read them a lesson, and sent them out of our valley discomfited, and punished in some measure for the wrong they had done us. But these reinforcements have come to Cortes, who survived the retreat, and our spies tell us that he is about to renew the attack.”

“At once?” demanded Roger, eagerly; “for if so, you must put thousands to work instead of the few I see below.”

“Hardly so soon,” was the answer; “for news reaches our ears that this Malinché will attack by way of the lake also. Hitherto his men have had to remain on the land, on the viaducts, while we have showered arrows upon them from the water, for we have an abundance of canoes. But he is having some big ships built—brigantines, they are called—and these are to be transported by the allies to the water, for they are under construction some distance away.”

The information was serious, and for a little

Roger the Bold

while Roger sat looking down at the smiling city, wondering how its defenders would fare when the Spaniards returned. He recognized already that these unfortunate Mexicans, who were so engrossed with their superstitions, were for all that a race of fierce fighters, to whom death was of little moment; for to die in battle or upon the altars was to be instantly transferred to the regions of the sun, to a Valhalla which was more than alluring. But they were badly led. Their attack was spasmodic, and often the work of a few men alone, when for success it was necessary that assault should be followed up, and forces combined. Against such fighting the Spaniards were bound to triumph.

"The ships will give them an enormous advantage," said Roger, at length, "and I advise that means be taken as soon as possible to prepare for them, and to stake the bottom of the lake so as to keep them from approaching. As to the land work, your thousands should be powerful enough."

"They should be, but are not, I fear," answered Teotlili; "for the horses strike dismay into the hearts of our men. The beasts are strange to them, and their struggles, the noise of their feet, and the sounds which they make startle our warriors."

"Then they must get over their nervousness. These horses are seen everywhere in England, and have long ago been servants to men, not their masters. You and your countrymen must rid your minds of all these superstitions, and recollect that these Spaniards are men like yourselves, though better armed, mounted in many cases, and trained to a form of warfare which is new to you. But I will teach you how to deal with them. I had a

News of Fernando Cortes

training under my father at the Tower of London, the fortress in our city, and there I saw many a sham attack and many a gallant defence. We will put our heads together, I and your king and some others, and we will commence to make preparations at once, for we must be ready when the day for action comes. Now tell me the allies upon whom you can rely, and their numbers, and the positions of their towns."

The two sat chatting on the terrace which encircled the summit of the tower, looking down as they talked into the busy streets, where the daily work of the city was progressing. The events of the previous day seemed to have made little if any difference, for the market was already thronged with buyers, while in the alcoves built round the vast square sat the king's officers, ready to settle any disputes, and prepared to pounce upon any who might make use of false weights. And round the square hummed the people of the city, thousands wafted along in boats, while a few were to be seen in the streets and on the viaducts. Farther afield the workers in the gardens could be seen tramping along the edges of the floating rafts of withies which bore the fruits of their cultivation, while outside were many canoes, some drifting idly, while others manned by five or six men were paddling off into the lake at their fastest pace. In the distance, backed by gorgeous mountains in broken array, were other cities, all well built, well governed, and inhabited by people who, till the coming of the enemy, had been happy and contented, if overcast by the shadow of the terrible altars. But times had changed, and now nations once friendly with the

Roger the Bold

Mexicans were allies of the Spaniards, and therefore enemies of the Mexicans, while others who had groaned under Montezuma's tributes, and had thrown off his sway for the rule of the new-comers, had changed again, finding already that the rule of the Mexicans was light compared with the rapacious greed and the overbearing manners of the Spaniards. And beyond the mountains lay Vera Cruz, the town founded by Cortes, where he was making his preparations, and getting his men together.

Teotlili, the noble who sat beside Roger, had spoken barely the truth when he told how the Mexicans had turned in their anger, and had driven the Spaniards out with loss; for when Cortes came to review his men after their escape from Mexico, he found that he had lost four hundred and fifty of his own men, and all his artillery. In addition, he had to mourn the death of some of his principal lieutenants, and of one son and two daughters of the late King Montezuma, who also were held as hostages. Four thousand of the Indian allies had been slain as well as forty-six horses, while in the days which followed numbers of others lost their lives; for the Mexicans hung on their flanks, till it is said that the plain was black with them. But Cortes was not the man even then to admit that he was beaten, and he and his men fought on, till at length he charged home with a few of his officers to the spot where the Mexican general directed his army, and himself cut the noble down. Then the enemy fled, and in due course Cortes and his remnant of men reached friends. After that, as the reader will remember, he set to work to construct some brigantines, and while they were building he

News of Fernando Cortes

went through the province of Mexico, despoiling those cities which would not ally themselves to him, and making friends elsewhere. Thus in a few months he had gained huge treasures and larger reinforcements. Meanwhile the Mexicans had set up their gods again, and seeing that trouble was before them, had made big efforts to secure allies to their own side. They sent into the provinces and granted freedom from taxation for a year, provided the cities would come to their aid. Then they turned their attention to their own city, and began to prepare for attack. It was at this moment, when they were incensed with the Spaniards, that Roger arrived, and, as can readily be imagined, it was at this particular period that they were in urgent need of advice and of help in their work of preparation. What wonder if, in the arrival of this tall youth, who fought so valiantly and resisted their efforts to slay him on the altar, the Mexicans, led by their priests and by Teotlili, discovered in Roger their long-lost god of air, and now that they had made the discovery, looked to him for guidance, and for a plan with which to beat back the enemy.

As for our hero, the thought of the struggle which could not be much longer delayed occupied his mind less than did that of his comrades.

"If only they were here," he said to himself. "Then we would beat back these Spaniards, and drive them from the country. What a fine thing to return to England with the tale that there was a people out here ready to be vassals to King Harry—people whom we had conquered by kindness! And we could truly say that they are not ordinary natives, for they are as civilized as are our own

Roger the Bold

people, except in their hideous forms of worship. Even that we could alter in time and with the use of patience."

He sat looking out at the streets for a little while, till Teotlili turned to him.

"My lord is lost in thought," he said. "He looks troubled."

"I was thinking of my comrades," answered Roger, "and wondering whether I could bring them here. I will try, that I promise, even for no reward. But if possible I will find this Alvarez who has the disc, and will bring that back also. How strange it is that it should have been in my possession, and that I should have so soon learned its history! We knew that it was connected in some way with the treasure here, but never guessed that it had come to Fernando Cortes' hands by a mischance. And now, supposing he has received it from Alvarez, or the latter, who is a traitor and deserving of death, has kept its possession to himself?"

"There will be nothing gained," was the answer, "for to make use of it our high priest must be consulted. He alone can read the secret written on the plan, for he has the special training. He then can learn where the treasure lies, and I promise that he will show it to you."

"And I will have it taken to another spot, for it might happen that this Alvarez might capture the priest and force him to disclose the place."

"A wise precaution," said Teotlili. "Capture the disc and it shall be carried out. But I see a stir in the streets below, and I think that the king is coming from his palace. I will descend and meet them if you will give your permission."

News of Fernando Cortes

Roger nodded, and then stood at the very edge of the tower, looking down from this giddy height. He saw that the crowd was again collecting in the courtyard below, and that a procession was passing toward it from the palace. There was the glitter of golden armour and the shimmer of silver plumes. Bright dresses were to be seen, while the blowing of horns became almost deafening. Then on every tower appeared a load of human beings, their path to the top being marked quite plainly ; for there was only one method of gaining the summit, and that by climbing the steps which encircled the building.

Was the procession bent on a peaceful errand? Had the people collected together to witness a sacrifice, or to see king and white man shake hands in friendship? Roger wondered, while he looked down on the scene uneasily. Then he recollected the words of Teotlili, and the abject humility of the priest, while his mind went back to the contest of the previous afternoon, and of the night which had just passed. His assurance returned in an instant, and he turned to Tamba with a smile.

“Let them choose,” he said quietly. “If it be war they shall have it, and I will fight to the very last. If peace, then they shall find that I will work for them as if they were my own people, and will do all that I can to beat off the Spaniards.”

CHAPTER XII

The Spaniards lay an Ambush

“IT is peace. The Mexicans see my master as I have seen him for many weeks now,” said Tamba, suddenly, as both looked down from the summit of the tower upon the crowds below. “Look, my lord, they are carrying banners and flowers, and they are coming towards this place with smiles of welcome.”

The native clapped his hands with delight, for though he had said little up to this, and had supported Roger faithfully, yet he had suffered torments at the thought of the fate which had awaited them, and more at the mention of such an end for the master who had been so kind to him. Now he eagerly acclaimed the coming of the crowd, feeling that it would bring friendship and a happier existence.

“The priest and this Teotlili are ascending,” he said. “Shall I go to them?”

“Let them come, and meet them halfway up,” answered Roger. “Tell them that I await them in all friendliness.”

The native was gone in a moment, and Roger watched him as he ran lightly down the broad steps of the tower. Soon he met the two figures which were ascending, and hailed them with cries of joy.

The Spaniards lay an Ambush

A few minutes later the three were on the terrace, where the priest and the noble greeted Roger with low bows as before.

"We are come to proclaim a truce," said Teotlili, with a smiling face. "Our king, nephew of Montezuma, and by name Guatemozin, follows, and he will take you by the hand, for he, as well as the people, recognize their error. He will ask you for your help, and will repeat the offer I made."

The news was more than welcome, and for a little while our hero could scarcely answer. For the strain had been very trying, and the issue more than doubtful. But he had himself to thank alone, for had he not resisted as he had done, he would certainly have been dead. His desperate defence of the tower had given the Mexicans time to look into the matter, and now they were able to see in the tall white man a friend, a god indeed, who would aid them against the Spaniards. Very soon the shrill whistles of those who led the procession could be heard, and within ten minutes some two hundred gorgeously appavelled personages were on the terrace. The central figure was a young man, tall and calm, and possessing a face which showed friendship and gentleness. He was dressed in a suit of glittering golden armour, and was a king in every sense of the word. Roger advanced to him, and bowed deeply.

"Do not stoop to me, I beg," said the king in broken Spanish. "I am but a vassal of yours, and am come to beg for forgiveness, and to ask for help. But I speak only a little of the tongue of these enemies, and therefore Teotlili will carry on the conversation."

Roger the Bold

He nodded to the noble, while he advanced and took Roger's hand.

"He says that this is a token of his good feeling and of his sorrow," said the noble. "It is seldom that the King of Mexico comes to greet a stranger, but this is a special occasion. He does honour to you with pleasure, for he feels that you are wise and strong, and have come at an opportune time. He asks whether you will help him, and whether you will become a cacique?"

"Gladly," answered Roger. "Say that I will do my best to beat back the Spaniards, and that I have already met them in battle. Say, also, that I think that it would be well to have a meeting of all his generals, when matters can be fully discussed. Preparations must be made to meet the better arms of the enemy."

Teotlili interpreted his words, and Guatemozin nodded. Then he spoke with decision, and the people about, all nobles by their dress, looked pleased.

"The king agrees, and will go now to the palace with you. You will be lodged there, and will be treated as your high station demands. He asks you to lay before him any suggestions which you may have, particularly as to new arms, by which the enemy can be kept from close quarters. That is how they have succeeded hitherto. Their lances have killed before we could come at them, while their cannon and their crossbows have slain our men at a distance which our arrows refuse to travel. In all these matters you can help. For reward, the king bids me say that he will be pleased to do all that I related."

The Spaniards lay an Ambush

“I will gladly do all, and more if possible, without reward,” answered Roger, interrupting the speaker. “But, should Mexico be taken, then I ask that men shall be given me to convey this treasure away. If we are successful, and the time comes to leave, then, if the king still wishes it, I will accept a reward.”

“It shall be yours in any case,” said Teotlili, emphatically; “only, the disc must be found and brought to us. Now, let us go to the palace, where suitable clothing will be given to you.”

Guatemozin took our hero by the hand and led him down the steps, Tamba following closely. Then he led him through the crowds of Mexicans, who shouted their welcomes, and strewed flowers before them. Indeed, the excitement was tremendous. People told themselves that a happier time had come, and that there was now some prospect of meeting the enemy. The very coming of this god of air would bring allies to their side. It was a fine thing for Mexico, and the population made the most of it. A quarter of an hour later the king and his guest entered the palace, and Roger was shown into a room which was luxuriously furnished, and decorated with panels of the most beautiful woods.

“Here is clothing suited to your rank,” said Teotlili, pointing to a couch. “I will stay and tell you how to don the garments. This is a padded surcoat of cotton, and it will keep out many a blow. It is light, and will enable you to move freely. Over that will go this suit of armour, while your head will be protected with this casque of gold decked with silver feathers. My lord looks a king

Roger the Bold

indeed in his new uniform. Guatemozin will be pleased."

He stood aside and looked at Roger with the utmost approval, and it must be confessed that the tall young fellow did indeed look every inch a nobleman in his borrowed plumes. His armour glittered, while his muscular arms and legs were clearly displayed, giving him the appearance of a youth possessed of huge strength. His skin had long ago been deeply tanned by the sun, so that now that he was dressed as a Mexican there was very little difference between him and the king or many of his nobles, for numbers of the upper classes were very fair. Altogether the change was excellent, for now the people would not be reminded so much of the Spaniard, and Roger could take his place as one of their leaders.

"I have almost all that I desire," he said, as he looked at Teotlili. "I am now known as a friend, and as such I require arms. Let me have my sword and crossbow."

Teotlili clapped his hands smartly, and spoke a few words as an attendant appeared. Then, within a few seconds the man came in again, bearing Roger's sword, his steel cap and shoulder-pieces, and his faithful crossbow and bag of shafts."

"Good!" he cried, delighted at seeing them again. "You shall see what a crossbow will do as compared with your little bows and arrows, and we will have some constructed. Now, lead me to the king, for I am anxious to put the work in hand, and then to go in search of my countrymen."

"And of the rogue who took the disc from you and sought to slay you with his dagger. Is that

The Spaniards lay an Ambush

not so, my lord? As to your comrades, our spies tell us that they are not on the coast now, and no news has come of them from the north or south. But follow me, and we will go to the meeting."

Roger felt strange in his new dress at first, and somewhat bashful at the thought of entering the huge room in which the conference was to be held. Indeed, he would have retreated, but suddenly remembered the estimation in which these people now held him, and that it was necessary for him to act up to his position.

"I will show them what a white man can do," he said to himself, "and if it is possible I will lead them so as to beat back the Spaniards. If only I could persuade them to give up the sacrifices as well. But I am no priest, and hardly know how to speak on such matters."

His thoughts were suddenly distracted by the sight which met his eyes as he entered the room in which the king and his generals were collected, while his heart beat quickly, and he flushed to the roots of his hair at the deference which all showed him; for, as Teotlili backed before him, all rose and bowed, while the king came forward.

"Let us now discuss the question from the very commencement," he said eagerly. "I will begin by telling our friend that we have made efforts to gather allies, and that many are now on their way to join us. Our embassies also left this very morning for distant parts, to visit the cities which are wavering, and they take news of the coming of the white man. Those are our preparations for reinforcements, while in this city itself we are storing food and grain, and laying by fresh water in huge

Roger the Bold

tanks which were constructed long ago. Our causeways are under repair, and arrangements have been made so that the bridges which divide them can be altogether removed. Now let the white man speak of arms, for ours are useless."

Teotlili interpreted the words, while Roger thought for a few minutes.

"You require lances," he said at length, "and these can be easily made. But tell me, when these Spaniards fell during their flight did they not leave many arms behind?"

"Not a great number," was the answer; "for, of those who fell, quite half sank beneath the water of the lake, where they lie now."

"Then you must send men with poles and hooks at the end, and must recover the arms," said Roger, with emphasis. "Then portions of the armour must be used to manufacture lance heads, while men must be practised in the use of the sword. Others must be trained to use the crossbow, which can easily be constructed here. I will give the plans, and I advise that the work be carried out at once."

"There will be no delay," answered the noble. "Tell our men how to proceed, and a hundred weapons will be ready in two days' time. And now for other matters. The king has already spoken of stores and of the causeways."

"You must decide to meet them outside the city," said Roger, thoughtfully. "You must fall on them at night, cut off their baggage, and endeavour to capture their guns and ammunition. Then I should build forts where the causeways and the aqueducts commence, for the latter in particular must be defended to the very last. Finally, I advise that we

The Spaniards lay an Ambush

go to the top of the tower again, where we can see the whole city, and from which point we can pick out the spots which most require defending."

There was a murmur of approval, and several of the nobles leapt to their feet and began to discuss the matter eagerly. Guatemozin nodded his approval, and came to Roger's side.

"These crossbows could be handed to our best bowmen," he said, "and then you might train them for us. How many do you advise us to have."

"As many as you can construct," answered Roger, promptly. "Your own bows are useless against the Spanish armour, but a shaft from a crossbow will often penetrate, particularly if aimed at a vulnerable spot, or at the face. Then the men with the lances should be trained together, and put under a leader. It will be their task to charge down upon the Spaniards when they are gathering strongly, and particularly to meet the rush of the horsemen. Let them be armed with short swords or knives, and then, if the horsemen beat down the lances, the men should throw themselves on to the ground, and as the Spaniards pass, leap on their backs or drag them from the saddle."

"The advice is good," said Guatemozin, thoughtfully. "The lances will hold the enemy back, while the crossbows will bring death to their ranks. But we must have some suggestion for the causeways. They will fight their way among those, and these brigantines will lie on one side and take us in the flank."

This, in fact, was the very reason for their construction, for the wily Cortes had long ago seen that a powerful enemy could hold his men in check

Roger the Bold

on the narrow causeway. If, however, he could keep their boats from the water, and could advance there himself, he would, with the help of his guns, be able to drive the enemy back, and so gain the causeway without much loss.

"You cannot stop the brigantines if the water is deep," said Roger, after a while. "If shallow, you might drive in numbers of piles."

"Then I fear that we must suffer, for the lake is very deep on either side of the causeway," answered the king.

"And there is no time in which to make a big boat for ourselves, and we have no guns, and ammunition is not to be found. Then we must think of another plan, and decide when we see the actual spots. But I think that our best way will be to break down the causeway in numerous places, leaving wide chasms over which a plank or two can be placed till the Spaniards come. Then it ought to be made still wider. Let men be stationed all the way along in their canoes, and arm each boat with a couple of poles with hooks at the end. Then the canoes can dash in as the fighting is in full swing, and the men can drag the enemy into the water."

For long they discussed their plans for the future, Roger's advice being received with the utmost respect. For it must be remembered that these natives had, for a couple of generations, been fighting with the same kind of arms as they now used, and against the same class of enemy. Their tactics, therefore, had required no alteration, and the coming of a new race with more effective arms and different methods had entirely nonplussed the Mexicans.

The Spaniards lay an Ambush

There were few amongst them who had any new ideas, and by now they had proved the old ones to be useless. No wonder, therefore, that they received these new notions with every sign of approval, and begged Roger to put them into practice.

"But we will eat first, and afterwards go to the tower," said the king, as he took his guest by the arm.

It was a magnificent meal, and Roger, who had seen something of court life in England, for he was often stationed about the palace, knew that this banquet would compare most favourably with anything which King Harry could show. The meats and the dishes were all beautifully prepared, while there was abundant variety. But he had other things in his mind, and was glad when they rose from their couches and went to the tower. From the lofty elevation he was able to see all the outskirts of the city, and when at length he descended it was with the knowledge that orders had already been given for the work of construction to be carried out.

"And now for the crossbows and the lances," said Teotlili. "I have already sent orders for the recovery of the Spanish armour and arms, and grieve that we did not trouble about it before. But we never thought of the necessity. Our divers brought up the gold which Malinché attempted to carry off, and after that we did not trouble. Now we will go to the artisans' quarters."

They tramped through the city, followed by a crowd of eager natives, while everywhere Roger was treated with the utmost respect. Then they reached the part where the carpenters plied their

Roger the Bold

trade, and here the wood for the crossbows was selected, and one of special toughness, and of somewhat greater length than the steel bow on Roger's weapon, chosen for that portion.

"A steel bow would have been better," said our hero, "but as we have none of the metal, wood must do. It will throw a shaft farther than the bows now in use, and a tip of iron to the former will do the rest."

Roger's coming was in fact the signal for unusually hard work in and about the city of Mexico, and when three weeks had passed he had the satisfaction of knowing that great strides had been made. Huge chasms now gaped in the causeways, while the edges of these were left steeply sloping, so that an enemy could not easily climb up them. Then archways were left for the secretion of a few canoes, whose crew could dart out at the proper moment and fall on the flank of the enemy. The opening of the aqueduct was also strongly fortified, though it seemed certain that the position could not be held for long.

"We will keep the water running till the last moment," said Roger. "Then we must fall back on our store. I should advise that as many as possible of the women and children should be sent out of the city, for then our stores will last longer."

However, his advice on this matter was not followed, for the Mexicans were a home-loving race, and could not easily reconcile themselves to parting with their families, a fact which afterwards had a fatal influence on their hopes of success. Unable to persuade them in this, Roger caused them to arrange for the constant supply of fresh provisions, to be brought at night by way of the water, and set

The Spaniards lay an Ambush

guards on the enormous tanks which held the city's supply of fluid. That done, he turned to the training of his two special bands, the one wielding long lances, tipped with sharp spikes made from the Spanish armour and arms, while the crossbow men carried a weapon which, if not as good as the one which he and Tamba used, was almost so, and could be relied on to do much execution.

"We will divide the lances up into three lots," he said to Teotlili, as that noble was one day inspecting the band, "for I think that the Spaniards may attack in three columns along the three viaducts. We will appoint their officers and give them a little practice, for one band can be pitted against the other."

At his direction the men reversed their arms, and lashed a piece of cotton to the butt end of the stout poles which held the lance head, padding the cotton with some loose material. Then one band was set to enter the city, while another opposed them. Roger taught them how to stand steady, to await attack, and how to make the most of their numbers, the front rank kneeling, while the rear rank, standing only a pace behind, stood upright, their lances protecting their comrades who knelt. At a shout the whole party would dart forward and take up a new position, or would retire slowly, facing the supposed enemy. But there was more to be seen, and Teotlili and the king, who was more than energetic in these days of preparation, and who had come to see how the bands were faring, were delighted at the next movement.

"We have no horses, but we can imagine them," said Roger, with a smile. "The enemy will rush

Roger the Bold

forward without arms, and my men will send a force forward to break up the supposed horsemen."

He whistled to the men who had been sent along the causeway, while a shout set those with the lances in motion. They ran forward to meet the supposed horsemen, and took up a position as formerly. Then some forty who stood behind them leaped over the shoulders of those who were kneeling and dashed to the front. Arrived within a few feet of the supposed horsemen, they shouted, waved their arms, and flung themselves on the ground.

"That is as far as we can train them without horses," said Roger; "but they know what is required. I have given them instructions to wave and shout, for horses are easily frightened. Then they will escape the lances by flinging themselves on the ground, while they need not fear the horses stamping on them. It remains to be seen how they will manage to deal with the enemy."

As for the men with the crossbows, they had rapidly acquired the use of their new weapons, and being skilled with the ordinary bow, soon were able to do almost as well with the others. Roger had set up a figure dressed in armour taken from the body of one of the officers who had fallen in the retreat of the Spaniards. The crossbow men spent hours firing at it, their instructions being to aim for the joints beneath the arms, and for the face.

So much progress had been made at the end of three weeks, that Roger felt that he could now turn his attention to other matters, more particularly as news came that the English ship had again been seen off the coast.

"Then I will see what I can do to reach them,"

The Spaniards lay an Ambush

said our hero, when Teotlili told him the news, "and I should be pleased if you could come with me. Then there will be no difficulties with your allies. I shall take Tamba and half a dozen of the crossbow men."

"I will come," was the answer. "Our allies will be glad to see you, for the report of your coming has already been sent to them. We have yet a month before the brigantines will be ready, and before Malinché can come. In that time we may reach your comrades."

"And also capture the golden disc," said Roger, with a meaning smile. "Our journey to the coast will take us to the neighbourhood of the Spaniards, and we will do what we can to hear of this Alvarez. When can we set out?"

Two days later the three, with six crossbow men following, left Mexico, each of the soldiers carrying a bundle of food in a bag suspended from his shoulders. They took the track which led across the plain to the city of some allies who lived on the mountain side, their journey being accomplished at night.

"Were we to start during the day, all the Spaniards' friends would know," said Teotlili, "for their spies are everywhere. Besides, we might be attacked and made prisoners."

"In which case I should have little to look forward to," answered Roger, with a grim smile. "They would have little mercy on a white man."

"They have placed a price on your head," said the noble, solemnly. "The news of your arrival has come to their ears through spies, and they have sent to all the cities offering a reward to any who

Roger the Bold

may take or kill you. No doubt they would treat your comrades in a similar manner. However, we have escaped their notice so far, and will hear what our allies have to say."

Roger was silent for some little while, for, in spite of the dangers through which he had already passed, it was a new and a terrifying experience to have a price set upon his head, to know that many thousands would be on the look out for him, eager to win the reward offered by the Spaniards. And their chances of success would be great, he reflected, for he was the only Englishman, the only one with a white skin, to be found in Mexico, and for that reason he would be particularly prominent, if his height did not make him that already. He began to wonder whether it would be possible to reach the brigantine, and return to the safety of his friends, where he would occupy a safer and a humbler position.

"No," he said to himself, after a little while. "I am a coward to be so easily frightened. Even if I come across my comrades, it is my duty to ask them to accompany me to Mexico, and, if they will not come, I will return alone, for I have given a solemn promise. Besides, there are the riches, the treasure to be won, which we owe to those who paid the expenses of our expedition. As for the reward for my life, pooh!"

He tugged at his sword till it was free, and drew it. Then he carefully inspected the edge, as if that were sufficient answer.

"He who captures me will have to beat this down first," he said, "and afterwards he will have to look out for my fists. I am beginning to think that



1:596

"THE BLADE FELL TRUE ON THE SOLDIER'S HEAD,
DROPPING HIM LIKE A STONE"

The Spaniards lay an Ambush

nature's weapons are not to be scoffed at. Now let us listen to these people."

By now they were in the palace of the allies, where Roger was greeted with the usual signs of rejoicing and respect. The cacique, or chief, having placed a meal before them, began to speak of the Spanish movements.

"They are massing close to the town where the ships are being manufactured," he said, "and I have news that there is to be a big review within a few days. Doubtless, after that is done with, the armies will march for Mexico. Meanwhile, the country swarms with enemies, and my people are frequently in conflict with them."

"And what of the English ship?" demanded Teotlili. "She has men aboard who will prove valuable allies."

"I cannot say," was the answer. "My spies report that she was within sight of the coast to the north a week ago. And now comes the rumour of noises at sea, such as the Spaniards make. At night bright flashes were to be seen accompanying the explosions. When dawn came none were in sight, though it is rumoured that a strange ship was brought into the harbour with these enemies."

"Captured! My comrades beaten! Sir Thomas would never surrender!" exclaimed Roger, aghast at the rumour; for if it were true, then he might bid adieu to all hope of return to England, save perhaps as a prisoner, and even then, Spain would be his destination, and not his native land. He sat dumfounded for a little while, Teotlili and the cacique watching him curiously. At length he spoke quietly.

"The rumour bodes little good to us," he said.

Roger the Bold

"If my comrades are taken they must be helped. I sacrifice all thought of Mexico and of its defence, and I give up all hope of the treasure, till I have made sure of their fate, and, if the opportunity can be made, have contrived to speak with them and rescue them. That is without doubt my first duty. I owe it to the King of England, and I owe it to a leader who was always kind, and to comrades who treated me well."

"And we honour you for the decision," said Teotlili. "Though it falls in but sadly with our own desires, we recognise that man's first duty is loyalty to his comrades and to his friends. Fidelity to the hand which feeds him and gives him favours. These friends of my lord's must be his first thought, and afterwards he can turn his mind to Mexico and her people. We will rest now, and to-morrow, before the dawn breaks, we will push on for the coast."

A little after midnight the party set out again, Roger feeling feverish with anxiety. Their faces were turned to the sea, and they aimed for the coast at a point a little north of Vera Cruz, where they hoped to gain definite tidings of the Englishmen. Soon they were clambering up the steep pass which led over the mountains, while the atmosphere gradually became brisker and colder. Clouds enveloped them, and as the dawn broke they marched in a thick, wet mist.

"It will last for an hour more," said Teotlili. "Then the sun will dispel the clouds, and it will be clear day. Ere that we shall be at the town of a friendly tribe, who live off the road."

An hour later, just as they were about to emerge

The Spaniards lay an Ambush

from a gully through which the track lay, Roger thought he heard a shout behind him, while the head of their tiny procession came to an abrupt halt.

"Some one is behind us, and the men think that others are in front," whispered Teotlili. "We will wait a few minutes, and then move on. I have sent a scout forward."

They huddled on the track, drawing their feathered cloaks about them, for the morning was a chill one. And as they waited the light steadily increased, till a dull gleam in the east showed the rising sun. Roger was just commenting upon its appearance, when there was a loud shout.

"Tueles!" called out the scout, who had been sent forward. "Spaniards! They have us between them! Fly!"

"The enemy! Spaniards!" explained Teotlili. "Then we must go. Come, my lord, follow me."

There was no time for further argument or explanation, for the voices of the Spanish horsemen could be heard, while the stamping of their horses' hoofs was very audible. Roger drew his sword, and set off after Teotlili, Tamba leading the way. Then a figure suddenly dashed out of the mist, and bore down upon him, lance in hand.

"Halt! Stand, or I run you through!"

The Spanish horseman took our hero for a native, and never imagined that he would understand. But Roger knew the language, fortunately, and as the man came to closer quarters, swung round and leapt suddenly aside. His sword went up over his shoulder, and the blade fell true on the soldier's head, dropping him like a stone. For an instant

Roger the Bold

Roger thought of leaping on the horse, but two other Spaniards put in an appearance. He turned, therefore, and ran as fast as he was able, till a cry of dismay escaped him. He found no ground for his feet, but plunged headlong down the side of the mountain, crashing on to the rocks some feet below. The fall stunned him for a little while, and when at length he was able to understand and look about him, he saw Spaniards guarding their prisoner, while his sword and crossbow had been removed, and his hands lashed firmly together.

“He has recovered. None but one of these dogs could have withstood such a fall,” said some one in authority, striding towards Roger and surveying him. “Then we will march and get to safer quarters. Tie the rascal to your stirrup-leather, Juan, and let us be moving. To horse, mount, and away!”

Some fifty troopers obeyed the order. They swung themselves into their saddles, while one of their number hastened to pass a noose round Roger's hands, and attach it to his saddle. Then there was a sharp order, and the cavalcade went at a trot down the pass, clattering their way over the stones and broken ground, and bearing their captive to the camp where dwelt Fernando Cortes. It was a terrible misfortune, and a sad and sudden ending to our hero's rising fortunes.

CHAPTER XIII

A Sentence of Death

“**R**UN quickly, dog, and do not drag so behind,” suddenly exclaimed the trooper who had made Roger’s leading rope fast to the pummel of his saddle. “There is no need to pull behind as if you were afraid that this beast of mine would stumble and fall. Or perhaps you are fearful of him, like all the other natives. Come, long legs make long paces.”

He gave a violent jerk to the rope, which caused the utmost pain. Indeed, Roger had already suffered considerably, for his hands were firmly lashed together, and the slightest pull on them caused him agony. And yet a little pain now might be life for all he knew. For that reason he had steadily dragged on the rope, causing the man to fall behind his comrades.

“Perhaps we shall come to some difficult part,” thought Roger, “when I will give a tug and then jump at the horse. A good push, with all my weight behind my foot, might send him rolling over, and kill the rider. It is worth trying, and even if unsuccessful the sudden execution which would follow would only anticipate my fate by an hour or two.”

But he affected to be unacquainted with the

Roger the Bold

Spanish language, and still dragged, in spite of the man's words, till suddenly the Spaniard turned in his saddle with a curse and a savage jerk of the rope. He pulled on his rein, and having brought the animal to a stop, vaulted from his saddle, while his comrades pulled up beside him.

"Now, what is the trouble? Why are you delaying?" demanded the officer, fretfully. "Do you not know that we are in the enemy's country, and that a halt may mean capture and more besides?"

He shuddered as he spoke, for even now, when reinforcements of men and horses had come to Cortes, and the campaign was about to be resumed, a dread fear of capture lurked in the minds of all. For that meant a visit to the summit of the huge tower in Mexico, and death on the altar. It was a hideous nightmare to scores of these Spaniards—these adventurers who had by now proved their bravery in many and many an unequal tussle. The very mention of the sacrifice appalled him, though these same men thought nothing of the awful tortures inflicted by their own side, or of the hangings and burnings which were often practised. And this leader of the little band which had captured Roger was one of the many who had fears, only he thought more of the matter perhaps than did others.

"Hasten," he said fretfully. "Do not let us waste a minute that can be saved. Come, Juan, what ails you, man? Why dismount now?"

"To let you or some other fool take the captive," was the cool answer, discipline in the invading army being none of the strictest. "If you are in haste, take the rope and lead this dog yourself while we ride on. I warrant that within a little while

A Sentence of Death

your leg will chafe against the rope, and you will find this fellow dragging like a load which is dead. And slowly you will fall behind, till your comrades are well in advance. Then, captain, a push from this captive's shoulder does the work, and you and your steed fall heavily. Mayhap you are killed, and better for you. Mayhap you live, and this dog, having smothered your voice, contrives to free his hands and carry you off. Then—ah, then comes the trouble.”

He grinned at his comrades, who enjoyed his subtle joke, and sat their horses, smiling openly; for their leader was a weak and an unpopular man, and they openly derided him.

“Then comes the trouble,” repeated Juan, with relish. “The dog smothers you, cuts his bonds, and then whistles to his friends. You are taken, and that very night the Mexicans enjoy a royal feast, to which they invite all friends. Spaniards are rare morsels, captain, and a leader of Spaniards a dainty bit which will not meet with refusal.”

There was a shout, while the leader stamped angrily on the ground, gnawing at his moustache in his annoyance. His face was flushed, and it was clear that he was thoroughly angry. But beyond that, in his heart of hearts these words brought terror to his mind; for the Mexican custom was not only to offer prisoners before the altars, but to roast and eat the bodies, the captor being given this special privilege.

“Cease your chatter!” he exclaimed wrathfully, “and let us move on. What caused you to halt?”

“The prisoner and the rope,” was the smooth answer. “The dog has attempted to do what I

Roger the Bold

spoke of; he was gradually pulling me back. But I will make an end of the matter. See here!"

He had been busily loosening the rope from the pummel of his saddle, and now that it was free he took the slack in his hand, and, grasping it firmly, jerked on it with such force that Roger turned suddenly, the pain causing him to twist round.

"See here, dog of a Mexican, I have no desire to make the feast for thy tables, and, so that you may not attempt to take me, will have a new arrangement. Drive a pig, not lead one, is the right motto, and that shall be my plan. I will drive you, and will hold this lance at your back so that you may have sharp reminder should you feel disposed to fall back. Now, on to your place, and, remember, fall back at your peril."

Again he jerked the rope, but Roger affected not to understand, and made no movement till the soldier took him roughly, and by dint of signs accompanied by many an oath, intimated to him what was to happen.

"Recollect," he said again, in his fierce voice, staring into his captive's face till Roger could have killed him—"recollect, behind there is a lance which has run through many a Mexican dog, and would pierce you as if you were made of paper."

"Come, come, gently, Juan!" exclaimed the officer, still scowling in his anger. "Even if he is a dog of a Mexican, treat him fairly and well, for it may happen that I shall have to report. His Honour, Fernando Cortes, generalissimo in this country, sent me here for a certain purpose, namely, to capture the giant who was leading the Mexicans, and of whose journey his spies had given him

A Sentence of Death

information. Well, I have succeeded, but if one of my men should spoil that success, if he should kill when the order was 'bring the dog alive,' then perhaps even I could not save your neck from the rope."

It was an excellent counter-thrust, and Juan scowled and swore under his breath with a heartiness never even exceeded by a British sailor. As for his comrades, though they did not favour their captain, still they could enjoy a joke, and they roared at the expense of their comrade.

"We will come and look on. We will encourage you and keep up your courage till the noose pulls tight," laughed one, in a husky whisper.

"Silence! Let us be going," ordered the captain. "Lead us, Juan, and we will see that you are secure."

They set out again down the side of the mountain, Roger in advance. All his plans were thus destroyed, and he ran on moodily, wondering where he would be taken to and how long he would be allowed to live.

"Rescue will be attempted; of that I am sure," he said to himself, by way of comfort. "Teotlili and the Mexican lords will never allow me to perish without making an attempt, for there is no doubt that they look up to me as to one of their hateful deities. How strange it all is, and how my father's eyes would open were he here to see and know all that has happened."

How strange, indeed, that he, a simple crossbow youth, should now be virtually ruler of Mexico; for his lightest word was obeyed, and Guatemozin and his lords deferred every question to him. Indeed,

Roger the Bold

had Roger desired it, he could have been elected as king, the rightful lord taking place as his minister. But he declined the suggestion made by the priests. In any case, he occupied a position which his wildest fancies had never attained to; and if he were successful, then there would be wealth on his return home, and even honour, for had he not already won praise and promotion on the brigantine?

"Halt! What is the report?"

The cavalcade had come to the base of the hill, and had met some three hundred natives, allies of the Spaniards. One of these lifted his hand to signal the horsemen to stop, and then advanced with an interpreter.

"There is huge commotion in the country," he said. "Since early morning men have been hurrying to and fro, and some cross the track between this and Tlascalala. You must ride faster if you wish to pass there in safety."

"Then mount the prisoner. Let the lightest man take him."

"And get his throat cut for his pains," growled Juan, as he prepared to free the rope.

"But no. We want a strong man, above all," suddenly added the captain. "Juan, I think you lay claim to strength, for I have heard you challenge any of your comrades to combat with you. You shall still hold the captive. Put him behind you, facing about, and we will surround you."

The task was not an enviable one, and Juan made his preparations for it with a very ill grace, while a sinister smile played about the corners of his leader's face. However, delay was to be avoided if they wished to reach their quarters in safety, and very

A Sentence of Death

soon Roger was astride the horse, his ankles lashed together, while a rope was passed about his waist, securing him to Juan. The troop got in motion again, and, breaking into a canter—a movement which made riding comfortable and easy for our hero—bore straight across the open towards a distant town, that of Tlascala, where Cortes then resided, and where his brigantines were in course of construction. An hour later, as the party approached a little closer, and the wall which surrounded the town became clearly visible, some three hundred dark figures burst from a ravine a little to the left, and raced towards the horsemen, uttering shrill whistles and shouts. Roger turned his head, and thought he saw Teotlili at their head, while the dress of the natives proclaimed them as friends and allies of the Mexicans. Then an attempt at rescue was about to be made. His late captors were true to him.

“Gallop! Lances down, and gallop!”

The leader gave the order in high-pitched words, and then took his place at the head of the troop.

“Surround the prisoner; and, Juan, do you lean well forward in the saddle, so as to stretch the prisoner and make movement difficult. Our men will protect you in front, while Pedro will hold his sword handy to slay the dog should he make an attempt to escape or to delay us.”

The advice given to Juan was undoubtedly good, for as the Spaniard carried out the movement, Roger found that the lashing about his ankles tautened, while the leaning-back attitude made struggling on his part almost out of the question. Still, he

Roger the Bold

resolved to make an effort if the time came, even if a sword were held in his face. By now the troop was galloping at a sharp pace, the leader having selected a long stretch of open ground favourable to horses, and across this he led them at an angle which slightly inclined towards the Mexicans and their allies. It looked as if all his efforts were concentrated in an attempt to fly past them without giving them battle, and at the thought the natives swerved from their course, and raced to cut off the party. Soon they were so close that Roger could hear their voices, and stirred uneasily, till the man who threatened him with his sword placed the point close to his breast.

“Stir so much as a finger’s breadth and I thrust the blade home,” he growled, while he looked askance at the enemy. “One hand’s breadth, remember!”

“Give us our god of air! Halt, and hand him over, when you may go free!” came a ringing voice from the natives.

“Charge! To the left! To the left!”

The captain of the troop, who, to do him but fair justice, was, in spite of his many fears of capture, a good and plucky leader, tugged at his reins, and, standing in his stirrups, directed his troop at the heart of the rushing enemy; in fact, his plan from the first had been to delude them, to make it appear as if he were about to escape to one side, and then at the last moment to turn and plunge through the natives. He relied for success upon the poor weapons which the Mexicans and their allies possessed, and upon their horror of the horses, whose weight ought to be able to burst a way through such footmen. But he counted his success too

A Sentence of Death

quickly, for Roger's teaching was to bear excellent fruit. There was a shout of dismay as the natives saw the horses charging down upon them, and many fled for their lives. But suddenly a figure became prominent in their midst, and all came to a stop.

"Shout! Wave your arms and shout! Then throw yourselves on the ground and hack at the horses, or endeavour to seize the legs of the riders. Men with the crossbows to one side, and search their ranks with your shafts. Beware of harming the prisoner. Death to the one who is so reckless."

Had Teotlili had a force of pure Mexicans with him, men who had undergone some training under Roger's orders, the success of his plan would perhaps have been perfect. But he had to deal with allies, men who had heard of the new and wonderful white man and of his methods, but who had not practised the latter. Still, if they had had no practice, they had at least the most abject and absolute faith in his advice, and at the command all came to a stop. Then the men with the crossbows, but six in number, ran to the side and placed shafts in their weapons, while the remainder waited, their eyes fixed on the noble who stood in their midst. And down upon them, lance lowered, or sword ready to deliver thrust or cut, rode the Spaniards, excellent masters of their horses, and with complete confidence in themselves. In fact, the horsemen had never known yet what it was to fail when opposed to the natives in this New Spain, for their weapons were even less terrifying to the Mexicans and their allies than were their horses.

Roger the Bold

For the natives looked upon these strange beasts as little short of gods, the superstition with which their whole systems were permeated leading them to attribute the utmost powers to the steeds ridden by the Spaniards. What wonder, too, when it is recollected that none in the whole country had ever seen such a huge animal before, and that no form of animal labour was known of, the human being undertaking every sort.

“Charge! Through them and then on to the town. Charge!”

It was the Spanish captain's turn now, and he rose to his full height in his stirrups; for he had at last caught a glimpse of the eyes of the natives, an infallible sign that the moment for the crash was at hand. He had waited for it before on many an occasion, and had stood so in his stirrups. Then the crash had come, his sword had whirled this way and that, and the natives had disappeared as if they had sunk into the ground. He selected Teotlili, and rode full at him.

“Shout! Shout and wave your arms!”

The gallant noble never moved, for he had braced his courage to the task, a task which might well have caused the boldest to give way, particularly under the circumstances. He stood firmly, and at his signal the natives shouted lustily and tossed their hands into the air. Shrill whistles came from others, while at the same moment six crossbow shafts, tipped with iron taken from Spaniards who had fallen at Mexico, flew towards the horsemen. One struck the armour of the leader with a dull metallic sound, dinting it deeply but failing to penetrate. A second caught one of the

A Sentence of Death

troopers beneath the arm as he swung his sword above his shoulder, and, penetrating to his heart, brought him to the ground like a stone. Of the remainder, two found a mark in the horses, bringing them with a terrific concussion to the soil, where their riders were immediately surrounded. But the main body still swept on till close to the natives. Then indeed did Roger's advice bear good fruit. For suddenly the horses reared and pawed the air. Some swerved to one side, one of the last throwing his rider, while others turned, and charging into those who followed, caused the utmost confusion. But a considerable number who occupied a position in rear still kept on, and rode right over the enemy. Once clear, they halted for a few moments, and then, seeing some of their comrades had fallen, they turned and charged back again. However, a flight of crossbow shafts and the determined attitude of the natives caused them to reconsider their decision. They were stunned by their unusual want of success, and by the methods adopted by an enemy who had hitherto been almost helpless. Then, as the latter ran towards them, eager to renew the conflict, they swept round and galloped off to Tlascala, carrying their prisoner with them. The unfortunate Spaniards who had been left behind, and who were not already dead, were pounced upon with eagerness, and carried off to the nearest town, there to suffer the horrible fate which had almost come to Roger. But the greater portion of the enemy gathered about Teotlili, and discussed their plans for rescue.

"Halt! Let us count our losses. A curse on the villains! Who could have expected such a manœuvre?"

Roger the Bold

The Spanish leader threw his sword blade above his head, and at the signal the troop came to a halt, the men eyeing one another askance, and as if they were ashamed. For this particular branch of the invading army had been wont to accept the praise of all, and to hold their heads very high. Time and again had their mere presence awed a multitude of many thousands of native enemies, till it came to be a saying in Fernando Cortes' force that the horse-men could subdue a nation if given time. And now——!

“A curse on them!” growled the captain again, as he looked round at his men and noticed the gaps in their ranks. “I would that we had never had cause to go on this expedition. For here have we one prisoner alone to show, and there are—how many are gone?”

“Five, captain. Pedro killed by an arrow. Never have I seen one of their shafts strike so true and so forcibly. Leon thrown by his horse, and Alonso dragged from his saddle by that man who led the enemy. Then there is Peter of Arragon, and John his brother, both thrown by their horses, which were struck by shafts. May mercy be shown to them!”

The second in command told them off on his fingers, nodding sadly at each name, while the captain listened with glowering looks. The men glanced uneasily at one another, while they peered over their shoulders at the pursuing natives.

“Five gone, and all for this dog. Hah! He is safe, then, though the price is dear. But listen, my men. We have never had such a tale to tell before.”

A Sentence of Death

“And hope never to have such evil fortune again,” growled the second in command.

“Nor such a low task to perform,” said Juan, feeling the weight of his prisoner, and fearful lest he should yet lead to his own captivity and death.

“We have always been the victors, and men who have been taken have strayed from the line of march. We were met in the early hours by a huge force. You will recollect that.”

He held his hand up and motioned with his forefinger as if to impress his words.

“A big force, in the half light of the early morning. We hastened to carry out our orders by dashing in to capture this tall native. We were beset on every side, and this is the result. We have the prisoner, but the five are gone. The tale will make good telling. Adhere to the facts.”

It was a rough and ready and a none too honest method of making their own actions appear all that was desirable before their comrades and their generalissimo, and the men took to the tale eagerly. They set spurs then to their horses, and galloped on to the town, the natives following some little way, till the appearance of others, allies of the Spaniards, caused them to beat a tardy retreat. Then the troop slackened its pace, and trotted through the big gateway into the long, wide street of Tlascala, the houses of which were defended by a magnificent wall such as the invaders had never seen in their lives before. And here they found thousands of natives, all bustling with preparations for the coming siege of Mexico, and for the review which Fernando Cortes was about to hold of all his troops, Spanish and allies. In one spot, where

Roger the Bold

there was a wide clearing, Roger saw many hundreds at work upon masses of woodwork, which they seemed to be taking to pieces. These were, in fact, the many brigantines of various sizes which Cortes had had built, under the able guidance of a shipwright in his company; and having been erected, they were now under process of disunion, so that they might easily be conveyed to the lake of Tezcuco. A few minutes later the troop came to the Spanish quarters, and having halted and dismounted, handed their horses over to native servants, of whom each soldier had several to attend to his wants. Roger was dragged from the saddle as soon as his ankles had been unlashcd. Then a guard fell in beside him, and the captain led the way.

"To the generalissimo's quarters," he said, in grand tones, pointing to the broad flag of Castile which flew from one of the finest buildings. "There we will tell our tale and leave this dog. Hah! I have scarcely looked at him before. He is tall and very fair! Surely not unlike our own people, or those other fellows who have pestered the coast."

"His fine feathers make him a native, but in appearance he is English, ventured the commander of the guard."

"Not far from the mark, I should say," agreed the captain, staring closely at his prisoner, and taking careful stock of him. "And were I asked I would swear almost that he understood every word spoken by us. There is a movement of his eye which seems to tell that he listens to every word."

A Sentence of Death

“Then he would know of our ill-luck, and might——”

“He had better keep a still tongue between his fine white teeth,” said the captain, in threatening tones. “He who tells tales of our branch of the service will have need to make them of the right sort, or else——”

“We shall quarrel with him, captain,” smiled the commander of the guard, sardonically. “It would be a bad day when the troops looked at the cavalry as common arquebusiers, or as men who wield the crossbow.”

For a little while they discussed the matter in low tones, their conclusion being that their prisoner was undoubtedly an Englishman, though as to his knowledge of Spanish they were more than doubtful. However, their doubts were set at rest within a little while, while the captain and his men went hot and cold at the thought of the easy revenge which Roger might take; for already the tale of their losses, and of the manner in which a huge force had been attacked, had been sent round the camp in Tlascalala. Roger was marched along the main street—a street which, compared with ours of to-day, would still be awarded the prize for general excellence of design, ample width and air space, and accommodation for any possible amount of traffic, and was ushered into the huge building over which the flag waved. In a courtyard behind, a council of officers was sitting, and the guard and their captive came to a halt opposite them. At once all eyes went to the tall figure of the captive, while Roger himself allowed his gaze to wander calmly around the circle, from the gaudily dressed native

Roger the Bold

caciques and nobles in their feather cloaks to the Spaniards. Lastly, his eye riveted itself upon one of medium height, who occupied a central position. He was fair for a Spaniard, though he had the usual swarthy complexion of the race. But there was a certain dignity about this man which marked him as a leader—a decision of manner which his lips, his nose, the set of his chin, and the general poise of his head and body seemed to indicate. And yet, though he had not said a word so far, and none had addressed him, Roger felt sure that he was the redoubtable Fernando Cortes, the man who had come to Cuba as a debtor, with nothing before him, and who, owing to some little favour which the governor of that island had shown him, had at length attained to the leadership of one of the numerous expeditions which left the new Spanish possessions every year without a single exception. The reader will recollect how that command had been snatched away again within an hour almost of its having been given. And here before him Roger saw the man who had dared so much, who had defied authority, had so skilfully managed his men that they had fought and clung to him even through adversity, while they had not grumbled when his reckless and wilful act of destroying the fleet had left a paltry five hundred Spaniards face to face with races already bitterly hostile, and able to put armies into the field amounting to many hundreds of thousands.

“Cool and calm,” thought Roger. “Says what he means, and sees that his orders are carried out. Trusts his inferiors, and believes that he and his men are born fighters.”

A Sentence of Death

"The white giant, the interpreter of the party. At last the net has fallen round them," Cortes was saying to himself as he looked at Roger, and yet without giving those who were present the impression that he did more than glance at the prisoner. "A bold fighter, I am told. Skilled with the cross-bow, and not without skill in ordering battle. His few weeks of authority have made a man of him, and he looks dignified and strong, though only a lad; but he must be frightened."

"The captive," said the leader of the troop of horse, anxious to make his voice heard. "According to orders, generalissimo, I rode from the town last night, and——"

"You have done well, though I like not the loss of five men," exclaimed Cortes, cutting him short, and showing that every piece of information was brought to him. Indeed, he was wonderfully served by numerous spies. "Stand back while I question the man. Your name?"

Roger could see the captain of his escort turn sallow under his bronzed skin as the words were addressed in Spanish, and almost smiled at the flush and the startled look which the unhappy leader of horse displayed as he answered.

"You are the interpreter of this beggarly ship which came from England. You went ashore to the south, and the ship left you there, being chased by a Spaniard. You then made your way to Mexico, where I hear that you occupy the position once given to me by their hateful priests."

"It is true. You have the story correctly," said Roger.

"And your comrades sailed for these parts

Roger the Bold

because of a golden disc which was captured. Who has that disc? Speak."

For a moment Roger wondered whether he should tell his story. Then he reflected that the probabilities were that Alvarez, the traitor, still had it, though he could not be sure. Perhaps there was some trick in this question, and, in any case, if Alvarez still had the disc, and was keeping it for his own private services, as seemed now to be most likely, then it would be better to leave that matter a secret. He could answer truthfully with a denial of any knowledge.

"The golden disc," he said quietly; "the one with the sun on one side and a plan on the other? I cannot say where it is. Doubtless Sir Thomas could tell you."

"He cannot. He refuses to speak. But I will find a means to alter his decision." A scowl came over his face, and he glowered upon Roger, hoping to see his prisoner quail. But he was disappointed. However, one thing he did accomplish. He startled our hero by his words.

"Captured! Can the men of the brigantine be captured?"

"Yes," continued Cortes, as if answering Roger's question, "this Sir Thomas and his men can say nothing of the disc. I have questioned them. They are prisoners. But you might know."

"I have already answered. I do not know," said Roger, firmly.

"Then we must employ other means to this leader of yours. But you can and will speak of other matters. You have been an honoured noble—a god even!" he sneered. "Mexico welcomed

A Sentence of Death

you with open arms, and made you a general. Therefore you can speak of the defences—of measures taken to hold our attacks in check. You have been brought here for that purpose. Speak, now, so that all may hear.”

“To do so would be to betray those who are my friends. I am on their side, and their secrets are mine, and are safe.”

Roger faced the general quietly, his arms folded, and his head and shoulders towering over the members of the meeting. His eye swept along the line, and he looked coldly into every face till he arrived at that of the captain who had effected his capture.

“You mean that you will not speak?”

Roger nodded.

“I give you two minutes to tell your tale. If you fail when the time is gone, you shall be hanged. To-morrow morning at dawn you will be tossed from the branch of a tree and left to dangle.”

The general looked at Roger with scowling brows, while the company leaned forward expectantly. But Roger was not to be frightened, though he had expected death from the moment of being captured.

“Why wait till to-morrow, general?” he asked coldly. “I have said that they are my friends. Would you act the part of traitor? Then do not ask me to do such a thing. Hang me if you wish it, but let me be true to my side.”

“One minute has passed,” was the answer, as the general drew out a cumbersome watch. “Less than one minute remains. Afterwards——”

He greeted his prisoner with another ominous

Roger the Bold

look; but Roger stood his ground without flinching. He looked calmly at his enemies, and bowed when the time had passed—bowed so coolly, and showed so little concern, that there was a murmur of applause, while Fernando Cortes, though he was bound to preserve an immovable countenance, displayed some admiration. But he was a stern man, and his word was his word.

“At six of the clock to-morrow morning,” he said, snapping the watch to. “Captain, you will see to the execution. I shall be there. March the prisoner out.”

CHAPTER XIV

Roger is true to his Comrades

ROGER and his guard of Spaniards marched out of the presence of Fernando Cortes in silence, the eyes of all following, some showing pity, some admiration of the bravery of the youth who could thus, alone amidst enemies, face his captor so boldly. As for the generalissimo, his scowl left him as the doorway and its curtain intervened between him and his captive, and he turned an inquiring eye upon his comrades.

"Will he yield? And does he know aught of the disc?" he demanded curtly.

"Nothing of the disc, I think," answered a bearded warrior dressed in his full battle array. "He has an open face, this tall lad, and he looked straight into your eye as he answered. As for yielding, the pain of torture might make him speak. But then, who is there here who can say that he himself would not give a secret if there were those in power over him able to work their fell will on his poor body? Even strong men call out under those circumstances, though they do not always tell the truth. But we would fain treat the lad with gentleness. He is a fine grown young man, and the English are not our enemies at home."

Roger the Bold

“Nor is he the leader out here with this wild-goose expedition,” exclaimed Cortes. “Still, he knows of Mexico, and lives may be saved and the task made lighter. Between us and an easy success lies his conscience. It must be salved, and if fear will not cause him to alter his determination, then we will see what other methods will bring about. I do not like it, this torture, my friends ; but, then, should the many suffer for this one ? Let him be taken to the hanging to-morrow, and we will see what his frame of mind is when his hour comes. It will be easy for us to grant a reprieve, and that may cause him to give way.”

Meanwhile Roger was marched through the streets of the town of Tlascala, the captain leading, and the guard about their prisoner. Not a word passed between them till they arrived at a large building of one story, placed close to the wall. It had a single door on the side which faced the street, and through this the party entered. They passed to the far side of the dwelling, and came to an open courtyard, about which were set walls of great height.

“This is your prison for to-day,” said the captain. “Fall out, the guard, and retire to the doorway. Now, Señor Roger de Luce, if that is the correct name, I have a request to make. You speak Spanish ?”

“Since I was a boy,” answered Roger, with a faint smile.

“And you heard our chatter when we rode into the town ? You listened to our tale ?”

“The one which now runs round the town ? Yes, I heard it. It meets the occasion well.”

Roger is true to his Comrades

“It would go hard with us if the right story were to be known. Will you keep silent till after to-morrow? Then——”

He shrugged his shoulders, pulled off his helmet, and ran his rough sleeve across his perspiring forehead.

“It is only for a little while,” he said lamely. “Will you promise?”

“Gladly, on certain conditions. You have a tongue, and can speak. After to-morrow it can matter nothing to you or any one whether I knew or not. Will you tell me of my comrades? A bargain is a bargain. My silence for your news.”

Fortunately for Roger the Spaniard had no fine feelings on the matter. This news concerning the English was common knowledge to all in the town, and therefore might be safely told to the prisoner. It would be a cheap price at which to buy his silence.

“I agree,” he said. “And you promise?”

“I give my word. Your tale is safe.”

“Then the English ship was captured. She is but a puny brigantine, and our vessels overhauled her in a light wind. A shot hulled her, and a second brought down a mast. She fell a captive, and the master and crew are prisoners here. 'Tis said that they would have been hanged long since were it not for the disc, though what value, save for its gold, there can be in the thing I cannot say. Still, 'tis whispered that Fernando Cortes keeps life within their bodies for one purpose, and that they will dwell in captivity here till the city of Mexico is taken and the nation is quelled. Then they will die, without doubt; for in coming to Spain's preserves

Roger the Bold

you and your comrades have courted and earned your death. That is the tale. You know now what has happened."

"But are they here, in this town?" demanded Roger.

The captain looked suspiciously at him, and pulled thoughtfully at his beard.

"It can do no harm," he murmured. "The youth is as secure as a bird in a cage, and there is but till to-morrow. They are here," he said aloud.

"Where?" asked Roger, quietly. "Surely it will not matter if I know."

"I will tell you. I admire your courage, and you are a good fellow to keep this matter to yourself. They are within this very building. It is the prison, and on the far side of the wall are the English prisoners."

The Spaniard nodded carelessly to the wall on his right, and turned to go.

"You have heard," he said, "and I can trust you. Then I will leave. To-morrow——"

"At six of the clock we shall meet again," answered Roger, coolly.

He stood looking after the Spaniard till the latter had gone, and then slowly crossed the wide courtyard till he reached the shade beyond, where he threw himself down at full length. For the first time he had an opportunity of reflecting upon his position, and its seriousness impressed him now with all its intensity. He was a captive, with enemies all about him, and death promised at sunrise on the following morning. But he could escape that fate if he spoke and told this Fernando Cortes what had happened in Mexico. It would be so easy

Roger is true to his Comrades

to speak about the lances, the men who had been trained to use them, and the hundreds who hoped to wield a similar weapon when the siege became an accomplished fact. Then there were the soldiers with the crossbow. These men could, with their own bows and arrows, hit an ear of corn when tossed into the air, and strip it of every grain ere it reached the ground, provided there were a sufficient number of them. With the new bow they had soon made excellent practice, as the captain of horse had discovered. Roger remembered that the dent had caught his eye not a minute before, and had caused him to feel a sense of pride and pleasure. How easy to whisper a word of these men, to speak of the defences outside, of the hidden canoes, and of the men with poles and hooks. And he had known the Mexicans for so short a time, and—and his life was at stake.

“Pooh! They would hang me later on with my comrades if not to-morrow,” he exclaimed aloud, rising to his feet and stalking backwards and forwards as if his thoughts had given him cause for vexation. “And, besides, friends are friends, and I will not be the one to tell tales even for such a stake. This Cortes shall find things out for himself, and discover that an English lad is not so easily frightened.”

Having made up his mind on the matter, he gave it scarcely another thought, though it is not to be wondered at that his impending end weighed upon his mind. But Roger had been closer to death. He had looked the scarlet-robed priest in the face, and had seen the glint of the obsidian blade which he carried. And he had been within a few feet of the

Roger the Bold

hideous altar on which the sacrifice was laid. Why should he falter now? Let him think of his comrades, of the brigantine, and of Tamba and Teotlili.

"They will attempt a rescue," he said to himself. "I am sure of that, and the fact of their pursuing shows how earnest they are. Tamba will never rest till I am dead, and then he will become worse than an enemy to these Spaniards. I shall wait for the night, and shall not give up hope till the morning dawns. I wish I could reach Sir Thomas and Philip and old Peter Tamworth. It would be nice to look on his face again."

The thought sent him to the wall, on the far side of which the Spanish captain had told him that Sir Thomas and his comrades lay, and he inspected it carefully. It was built of dried mud, and presented a smooth surface some twenty feet in height. Clearly the task of clambering to the top was out of the question. And, besides, his guards would discover the action, and there would be trouble.

"All depends on their posts," said Roger, thoughtfully. "The men who brought me here seem to have marched away again, and I have seen no one. I will stroll to the doorway and watch."

He moved slowly across the square, inspecting the walls and the tiled flooring, till he came to the doorway which gave access to the long passage-way leading to the street beyond. There was a dark figure standing in the sunlight, and he bore a javelin of native manufacture over his shoulder. A second native joined him at that moment, while within a few minutes Roger caught sight of others. It was clear that the guard was composed of allies alone, and that they considered the walls of the square

Roger is true to his Comrades

sufficient protection against escape. The doorway was the only exit, and they filled that, while in the space of ten or more minutes some hundreds of natives passed along the street.

"They seem to have made up their minds to leave me alone," thought Róger. "But I should like something to eat. I will call, and ask for food and water."

He strolled into the passage, and called softly to the sentry, using the few Aztec words with which he was acquainted.

"Bring me food and drink," he said. "I am hungry, and have been travelling since early morning."

The sentry turned at once, and bowed respectfully, while he called to a comrade. The latter soon appeared, bearing some meat and fruit, and a vessel filled with native wine. He, too, paid his prisoner marked attention.

"The orders are that you shall have all that you require," he said in fair Spanish. "Does my lord need anything more? A knife, perhaps, with which to cut this meat?"

Roger was astounded, and looked at the man closely. A knife! Why, with that he might effect an escape. But he had hardly had time to express astonishment when the man's tone suddenly changed, though he was still polite.

"This is the meal," he said, "and I have orders to supply your wants. I will return within a few minutes, and see how you are faring."

He placed the dish on the ground in a shady corner, and turned to leave. Then, for the first time, Roger noticed that the sentry had softly crept

Roger the Bold

through the passage, and stood at the doorway looking on. He made way for the attendant to pass, and as the latter slipped by him, Roger noticed a swift movement of his hand. It went to his lips, and he shot an expressive glance at the prisoner.

"Strange," thought Roger, as he sat down to his meal, and commenced to eat, without taking notice of the sentry. "That was a signal. But the man is dressed in the uniform of these Tlascalan allies of Spain. Can he be a friend? Can Teotlili have come here already, and set the wheels in motion which may lead to my rescue?"

It was impossible to answer the question, though a signal had certainly been given. Roger could scarcely swallow the food owing to excitement, for now that the merest thought of rescue had come to mind, he realized the awful position he was in, and the dread fate awaiting him. Spaniards were reputed to have little mercy, and he had lived in their country, and knew that the tale was true.

"I will watch the attendant carefully," thought Roger, "and speak to him if I have an opportunity. I can see the door and some little way into the passage from here, and by moving a little to one side, I shall be able to keep an eye on the street beyond, for the sun strikes full into it, and it is brilliant. Then I can tell whether the sentry is coming or not. Yes, and I'll take no notice of the attendant, though I will speak to him."

He ate his meal rapidly, and took a draught of wine. Then he lolled on his side, and as if unable to obtain complete comfort, moved a few feet away, till he could see into the street. Then he yawned

Roger is true to his Comrades

as the sentry looked in, stretched his arms, and finally lay down on his face, burying his head in his arms. But he gradually shifted the position of his head, and at length lay in such a position that he seemed to be sleeping while he really kept watch on the door. A little later the attendant entered, and Roger saw him make the same signal again, and saw also that the native realized that he was pretending sleep. He crossed the square leisurely, and when he had arrived at the vessel which contained wine, he stooped to pick it up. At that moment the sentry happened to glance in, and Roger saw him laugh as the attendant slipped and fell full length. He watched for a moment as the man picked himself up, and then resumed his beat, as if satisfied that the fall was the result of accident. But his sharp eye had failed to detect a quick movement. As the man fell, a steel dagger had tumbled from his belt, where it was hidden beneath his cotton tunic, and an accidental touch of his hand had sent it close to Roger. Our hero's hand went out slowly as the sentry turned away, and in a moment the weapon was concealed, while the attendant was busily engaged in brushing the dust of his fall from his limbs and clothing.

"You are a friend. What is the news?" demanded Roger, in low tones.

"A rescue to-night, in the far corner. Be ready, my lord."

The man turned to the corner, so as to point it out, and burst into a roar of laughter, while he rubbed his shins energetically. Roger glanced at the doorway, and saw the reason for such strange conduct, for the sentry was there again, and had

Roger the Bold

advanced some little way into the passage. However, the action of the attendant was so natural that no suspicion was aroused.

“The clumsy fellow!” said the sentry, with a grunt. “He will break his head one of these days, and will not get off so lightly. Ah! The giant, who our enemies say is the long-expected god of air, is angry at being aroused. I would not encounter his wrath for anything, for doubtless his powers are great. Did he not go to the foot of the altar, and there defeat priests and nobles alike?”

It was evident that Roger had adherents even in the enemy's camp, and, to tell the truth, although these native allies hated the Mexicans because of the taxes imposed, and because of their overbearing manners in former years, yet their beliefs were the same, though they did not perhaps practise the human sacrifice to such an extent. Still, their deities were common to the Mexicans, and they, too, had looked for the coming of this mythical god of air. Secretly they thought much of Roger, and grieved at the thought of his coming execution.

Meanwhile Roger had acted his part with swiftness and discretion. He had replied to the rude laughter of the attendant with a scowl and with seemingly angry words, and so well did he play his *rôle* that the sentry turned on his heel and marched down the street, to relate the misfortune which had happened to the attendant. It was, in fact, a welcome episode in the long and weary duty of acting sentry.

“Who will come?” demanded Roger. “And who are you?”

“My lord Teotlili and a servant. There will

Roger is true to his Comrades

be more besides. As for me, I am a friend to the Spaniards, or was till this last week. Hush! They have taken my wife and my daughter from me, and I will therefore leave them. To-night, my lord, and in that corner."

"Wait," said Roger, eagerly, while he curled himself up as if about to seek sleep once more. "What of the other English prisoners? They must be rescued."

"Impossible, my lord. The town swarms with natives and with Spaniards. Escape for you is well-nigh out of the question. For many it is hopeless."

"Listen," said Roger, sternly, as he buried his head in his arms again, as if he had done with the man. "These comrades of mine must be rescued. Bid Teotlili make arrangements to take them also. Say that it is my wish and my order, and that unless it is carried out I do not take advantage of their efforts. Now go. I shall be ready to-night when the time comes, but only if the others are taken also."

It was almost comical to watch the attendant's expression as the words reached his ear, strange words, too, for who amongst the natives ever heard of such a proposal? Here was a young man, condemned to die at sunrise, and he declined to be rescued unless comrades received help also. It was sheer madness, ingratitude almost to those who were taking such risks for him, and who well might fall victims themselves. His chin dropped, his eyes opened to the fullest extent of the lids, and he stared at Roger spellbound.

"Fool! The sentry will suspect," said our hero, sharply. "You heard the message and my

Roger the Bold

determination. Then go, and bring me more food later on. I shall be hungry before the night comes, and a hungry man is weak. Besides, you may have news."

He shut his eyes as if already asleep, and when the sentry again passed the doorway he observed the prisoner lying still in the shade, and the attendant bearing the jar and the remains of the repast away, looking ruefully at his shins as he came.

"A clumsy fall," remarked the sentry. "In the days of Mexican power a tumble like that in the presence of so great a man might have led to trouble."

"It has done so now, comrade," was the answer. "My lord was asleep, and scolded me. But I am forgiven, though I cannot easily excuse myself. However, he sleeps again, and will continue to do so. It is a farce setting a watch over him when there are so many of us about and the walls are so high."

The sentry evidently cordially approved of this statement, for he continued his beat, grumbling at the task, at the heat of the sun, and at the fate which had set him there, pacing aimlessly up and down, when he might have been in his own house enjoying the society of his wife and children. As for the attendant, he sauntered along the street, carrying the jar, till he came to the end of the building, where he turned into a low doorway. Within he deposited the jar, and then stole softly to the back of the house. A flight of stone steps led to the roof, where there was a tower, and he proceeded to clamber to the summit of it. Once on the roof, he kept in a crouching position, and gradually raised his head to an

Roger is true to his Comrades

aperture in the surrounding wall. There was a tower on another dwelling some yards away, and a man occupied that also, one of his comrades by his dress. But he, too, made every effort to keep away from the observation of those in the street below, and, beyond signalling his presence to his comrade who had just appeared, made no movement. Five minutes later, however, when the street was empty, and no one seemed to be approaching, he put his hands to his mouth, and called softly to his comrade, his voice easily penetrating to the other tower.

“What fortune?” he demanded in Spanish, and in tones which strangely resembled those of Tamba. “Is my lord well and unharmed? Speak, for if he has been hurt I will go at once to do the bidding of Teotlili. I will seek for this Malinché, and will throw myself on him, and slay him with my dagger.”

His eyes blazed as he said the words, and he rose till the whole of his head was visible.

“Hush! Be cautious. You will ruin all, and we shall be tortured,” answered the attendant, fretfully, and with an anxious glance down the street. “Such an attempt would cause us both to be killed. I will not help you, and if you threaten to perform such a reckless act I will have nothing more to do with your party.”

“Then you will make friends once more with the Spaniards. You will fawn upon and lick the hands of these wretches who have taken your wife and child. Listen, and I will tell you my tale. I am from Cuba, where these Spaniards came, as they have come to you, with fair promises and with welcoming smiles. We formed an alliance with them at first, till it was

Roger the Bold

too late. Then we became their slaves, while our wives and children were snatched from us. Our miseries were so great that thousands hanged themselves. That is what you will do. Is it better to risk death now, or to wait for slavery and for the misery which is certain to follow? Go to your masters. Tell them that they may have all that you love. We will find others to help us."

Indignation had roused Tamba thoroughly, while his anxiety for his master made him more than bitter. But he was a shrewd native, and long suffering had taught him much. By speaking as he had done he brought before the Tlascalan the full weight of the injury done him, and revived his bitterness and hatred. It was a masterly stroke, and at once converted the half-hearted native to the side of the Mexicans.

"You are right," he said humbly. "I cannot take the hand of these barbarians again. I will help, even if it be in an attack upon Malinché. But my lord is not hurt. I have spoken to him, and he will be ready to-night; but——"

"But what? Is he ill, or did he suffer a wound in the attack yesterday?"

Again Tamba stretched far out of his hiding-place, till the frantic signal of the native caused him to sink back again.

"He is well—have I not said so?" he called out testily. "But he will not be rescued unless his comrades are taken. His message to Teotlili was strict. If you come to-night, he will go only on condition that the others are taken. Otherwise he will wait and be hanged."

Tamba's dusky face went a pallid hue at the news,

Roger is true to his Comrades

and this time he sank back on his knees as if some one had struck him a blow.

“Not escape unless we can take the others!” he gasped. “It is like my master. He thinks always of his comrades.”

For a little while he was silent. Then he leaned forward again.

“Go to the prisoner as soon as you can,” he said, “and say that we will obey his wishes. An attempt will be made to take all from the prison.”

The signal passed again between the two, and they crept from their perches, no one in the town of Tlascala having observed them. Some three or four hours later the attendant went again to the prison, and having bandied a few words with the sentry, entered with a dish of food and another jar of wine. He found the prisoner still apparently asleep and disinclined to be disturbed. But Roger was in fact wide awake, and had been looking for the return of the native.

“Have you news?” he demanded. “Will they follow my orders?”

“To-night all will be rescued if that is possible,” was the answer, as the man set down the dish and the wine. “I have seen Tamba, my lord’s servant, and he has given the promise. To-night all who came to this country in the ship which was recently taken by the Spaniards shall be rescued. Let my lord look to the corner. He will find a cool spot there in which to sleep.”

There was a crafty smile on his face as he spoke, and he made the same signal as formerly. Then having asked if Roger required anything more, he bowed to him and withdrew.

Roger the Bold

"The prisoner will give you no trouble to-night," he said to the sentry, a new one by now, the other having been relieved. "He passes his time in sleep and in eating. These white men are strange, for the thought of death at sunrise has few fears for them."

"Not for this tall god of air," was the answer. "A fine man, and fit to fill an honoured post! 'Tis a pity that he should be slain. But that is not my business. I am thankful that he is peaceful, for were he to walk towards me and attempt to escape, I could not stop him. I could not even cast this javelin at him."

"Have no fear. He is quiet," said the attendant. "You will be undisturbed."

An hour or two later it began to get dark, and Roger, who had meanwhile eaten the food and taken the wine, dragged some native mats, supplied for a bed, into the corner, and there he threw himself down, his position enabling him to keep a watch on the summit of the wall, where it cut clear and dark against the sky.

"If they come I shall see them," he said. "I shall wait till after midnight, and if after that there is no sign of them, I shall try to cut a ladder in the wall."

There was no use in being despondent, and therefore he lay there droning to himself, or thinking of his friends in England. Once he heard a step behind him, a silent stealthy step, and guessing that it was the sentry, spoke to him without turning his head.

"Why do you creep in?" he asked quietly. "You disturb my slumbers. Retire at once and leave me."

The man was astounded. He thought that he

Roger is true to his Comrades

had made no sound, and it was uncanny to be addressed by the prisoner when he had not even turned his head.

He bowed and went away apologizing for his suspicions, leaving Roger to himself.

“Hist! My lord! Tamba is above.”

It wanted yet some three hours to midnight when the words came softly to our hero's ears, and looking up he saw a dark outline crouching close to the wall just above his head. Then the tinkle of some metal instrument was heard, and groping in the darkness his hand came in contact with a sword. Thoughtful Tamba! He had taken pains at the very first to see that his master was armed, believing that if the alarm were given he was capable of escaping unaided. But the rope to which the sword was attached was a stout one, made of soft cotton, and Roger guessed its purpose, and grasped it with both hands. The sword he slipped into his belt, while he placed the blade of the dagger between his teeth.

“Ready above?” he demanded softly. “Then hold on, for I am coming.”

CHAPTER XV

Back to Mexico

“**H**IST! Silence!” It was Tamba’s voice again which came from the top of the wall, and at the sound Roger halted. Already his hands had grasped the cotton rope which had been thrown to him, and he was in the act of clambering up when he heard the warning.

“Come quickly! I hear men about! Climb for your life!”

This time Tamba leaned over till it seemed that he must lose his balance and topple to the ground. He jerked at the rope, and Roger began to clamber up as rapidly as he could, though he found that a soft cotton affair of this description was not the easiest thing to make one’s way up. However, at length he arrived, and the faithful native dragged him on to the top of the wall.

“Lie flat, my lord,” he whispered. “I still hear voices and men walking, and I am nervous of interference. There! Listen to that! The Spaniards are about.”

Roger did as he was told, and squeezed his huge proportions as close to the top of the wall as he could. And as he lay there and listened, rollicking laughter came to his ear. Men were passing down

Back to Mexico

the main street of Tlascala, and they were Spaniards. They were in excellent spirits too, for their laughter filled the air, while one of the band set up some popular refrain, and his comrades joined in whenever he came to the chorus, swelling the sound till the town rang with it.

"Invaders who have been having a merry night," thought Roger. "They have been dining together and drinking success to their coming expedition. Ah! There are others."

He lifted his head and listened to the hoarse voice of some other Spaniard coming from the far end of the street, and soon learned that it was the sentry stationed opposite the quarters of Fernando Cortes.

"To bed!" the man called out. "Stop your noise and get to your quarters, or there will be trouble. The general has retired this three hours and more, and he will not thank you for awaking him when he has to be out so early. Get home and be silent."

The crash of his clumsy arquebus could be heard as he brought the stock to the ground, while Roger noted that the merry-makers still went on with their song, though their voices were now less noisy than before. They passed the sentry, chaffing him as they went, and then, when they had increased their distance from the headquarters, shouted at the top of their voices. But soon the noise died down, and not a sound broke the silence. It was time to move again. Roger turned to Tamba.

"The others?" he asked. "Where is Teotlili, and what preparations has he made?"

"He is outside, my lord," was the answer. "He

Roger the Bold

is waiting till you have come to him, when he will attempt the other rescue. We have a dozen ropes with us, and those will be sufficient to pass all the prisoners out. There are thirty-four in all, so that they should be able to climb within a few minutes. If there is an alarm, my lord will be safe outside, and can escape. That is Teotlili's arrangement."

"But it will not suit me," whispered Roger. "Have my comrades been warned? For if not, they will be too surprised to take advantage of the opportunity. Or they may think that it is a ruse on the part of the Spaniards. Who knows? They will certainly feel suspicious. I will go down to them, and then send them up. But one moment. How many men are there outside?"

Tamba waited a few seconds, calculating the number before he answered.

"Three hundred, perhaps," he said. "They came to our help eagerly, and they hung on the tracks of the men who made you a captive. They have sworn to rescue you. For your friends they do not care so much, though Teotlili will be glad to have them also. You are the main reason for our being here—the only reason, in fact."

"What preparations have been made for flight?" demanded Roger, in low tones. "Quick, Tamba, for we must not delay."

"None," was the quick reply. "None that I am aware of. We were to effect a rescue, and then cut across to Mexico direct. We should be there soon after dawn on the morrow."

"Not if we do not take precautions to hoodwink these people," thought our hero. "If there is no

Back to Mexico

alarm, all the better for us, and we shall reach Mexico safely. But supposing there is some noise, and this attempt is discovered, we shall be pursued and shall be taken. There are thousands of natives in this town."

"And a hundred thousand outside," whispered Tamba. "The country swarms with them."

For a minute or more there was silence. Then Roger again addressed Tamba.

"Drop the ropes into the compound where the prisoners are," he said with decision. "Then go to Teotlili. Give him this message. He is to send a hundred of his natives to the far end of the town at once—I mean to the end opposite to that from which we shall escape. If they hear an alarm they are to shout and rush at any of the native allies of the Spanish that they may see. They are to attract attention to themselves, and then are to disappear in the darkness. The remainder will divide themselves up into four bodies, and each one will take an equal number of my comrades. They will march away at once, and make for Mexico. They will endeavour to keep together, but if there is an alarm they are to separate, and each body is to make the best of its way to safety. Do you understand? Then go at once. I will give you a few minutes to give the message, and Teotlili sufficient time to make the arrangements. Then I shall go to my friends, and commence to send them up to you."

Tamba would have remonstrated, and attempted to dissuade his master, but Roger cut him short.

"You heard?" he demanded peremptorily. "Then go at once. We must not delay."

They crept along the top of the wall till they

Roger the Bold

had passed the spot where the dividing wall of the prisons was met. There Roger found that the ropes had been made fast from the outside, where he fancied he could see a number of dark figures, while a couple of other ropes were attached to wooden pegs silently driven into the top of the walls, and giving sufficient hold to bear the weight of a man descending by the rope. In fact, all was in readiness for the attempt, and if no alarm were raised all would be well. If the sentry discovered the attempted escape the town would be alive within a short while, and Roger guessed that many of his countrymen would be taken. Then death would follow swiftly.

"Teotlili should have made his preparations now," he said to himself, when some three minutes had passed, noticing that many dark figures were flitting to and fro at the base of the wall. "And here comes Tamba. It is time that I was moving. But I will wait for Tamba to tell me where the prisoners are sleeping."

A minute later the native was beside him, breathing heavily after his rapid climb.

"The hundred have gone to their hiding-place," he said. "They have a leader, and he has the orders. The remainder are now divided and ready. These people are wonderful at obeying directions, and the darkness does not confuse them. Now, master, I will tell you where these other prisoners are. They sleep round the walls on mats, just as you were pretending to do, and some will be directly below. We hear that they have already made an attempt at escape, and that they were nearly successful. But the Spaniards raised an alarm, and

Back to Mexico

they were all taken. Would it not be as well for me to descend?"

He asked the question simply, and waited eagerly for Roger's answer, for he had clambered back to his side with express orders from Teotlili.

"Send my lord down to me if possible," the latter had said; "then, if there is an alarm, I can hurry him away to safety. Do not let him risk his life for these other men."

"You will wait here," answered our hero, shortly. "If you went down they would take you for a Tlascalcan, and there would be an outcry, perhaps. They will know me. I speak English, you see. Besides, there is Philip, and Sir Thomas knows my voice. Now let me get to the rope. In a minute I will send the first man up."

He grasped the rope firmly, and tried its strength. Then he swung himself over the edge of the wall and slid to the ground below. Arrived in the prison, he stood still for some seconds, for the darkness was very dense. Then gradually he was able to make out the outlines of the place, and saw a number of dark figures lying round the walls. One was within a couple of yards of him, and he crept towards the man. Then he kneeled beside him, and touched his arm, while he placed his hand over his mouth. The man sat up with a start, and made frantic efforts to get his mouth free. He kicked desperately, and would have shouted out in his terror had not Roger suddenly whispered in his ear—

"Beware that you do not make a sound or give the alarm," he said swiftly. "I am Roger de Luce, and I have friends outside. Silence, man, or I will stun you!"

Roger the Bold

His voice assumed a sterner tone, and he clung to the figure, his hand tightly clasped about the mouth. And it was as well that he had taken that precaution, for this happened to be Peter Tamworth, the little sailor with the enormous nose, who had obtained possession of the disc, and his nerves were none of the best. Capture by the Spaniards and fear of execution or of torture had unhinged his courage, for the little sailor had been a dashing fighter. However, this sudden awakening was almost too much for him, and had it not been for our hero's precaution he would have destroyed every chance of escape.

"Silence!" repeated Roger. "Now, sit up, and lead me to Sir Thomas, and afterwards to Philip. Come, man, do not act as if you were dazed. I am alive, and not a ghost; and I have friends here who are come to help us all. Sit up! Now lead the way."

Time was of the utmost importance, and so earnest was Roger that this delay fretted him. Peter still peered at him through the gloom, and shook like a leaf. He made no effort to rise, but sat there on his mat, gaping and shivering. Roger took him promptly by the shoulders, and with a heave raised him to his knees.

"Crawl to Sir Thomas," he whispered hoarsely, "and stop shaking. You are not hurt, man, and I am no spirit. Come, do as I bid."

The stern tones and Roger's well-known voice brought Peter Tamworth to his senses at length, and he went along beside the wall on hands and knees till he arrived at a figure some yards away.

"This is he," he said in a whisper. "Better

Back to Mexico

that I should wake him. He thinks that you are dead."

Bending over the leader of the expedition which had proved so disastrous, Peter shook him gently and spoke in his ear, with the result that within a few seconds the commander of the brigantine was kneeling beside Roger, gripping his hand till the bones almost cracked.

"Something told me that you would come to our help, and that you still lived," he said hoarsely. "What is your news? Are we to go now?"

"At once," was the answer. "Peter can wake the men while you climb. Go at once, please, and then there will be no waiting for the others."

He led the commander to the dangling rope, and called softly to Tamba above. Then he hoisted Sir Thomas on his shoulders, and gave him such a start that he was easily able to reach the top of the wall. By that time Peter had roused some of the men, and they came along, singly and in couples, all on tiptoe, and all eager to get away from the Spaniards.

"'Twas nigh a hanging matter when we made the attempt some few days ago," said Philip, as he came to Roger's side and spoke to him in tremulous tones which told of his joy at their meeting. "If we are taken now it will be our end."

"Then you will not be taken," answered Roger, curtly. "I was ordered to be hanged at dawn to-morrow. I will fight till I am killed rather than submit to these Spaniards. But silence! You will ruin everything. Come, do not delay."

It was wonderful to see the meek manner in which all, from Sir Thomas downward, obeyed their

Roger the Bold

young comrade. They clambered up the rope in silence, and dropped to the other side, wondering what was to happen next. And there they waited for the young giant who had so suddenly and unexpectedly come to their aid.

"What next?" demanded Sir Thomas, when at length all had left the prison, and he had counted their numbers to make sure that none remained behind. "Now, Sir Giant, you are our commander, and we look to you for orders. What are they?"

"Divide into four parties at once," said Roger, peremptorily. "Let Peter and Philip take one group each, while you take a third, Sir Thomas. I will lead the other. Now, you will be joined by natives, and they will lead you. If there is trouble, you are each to go with your own lot of natives, for we could never pass across the country together. Now, hurry, please, and silence!"

There was need for his warning, for the men had commenced to chatter together, some wishing to go with particular friends. However, at Roger's voice they separated, and silently grouped themselves. Then Teotlili gave vent to a curious hissing sound between his tongue and his teeth, and natives filed about the groups.

"We will lead, my lord," he said, coming to Roger's side. "The others will go to either side once we are out of the town. Now, let us be moving."

"Hark! I heard something!" whispered Roger, suddenly. "Listen now! Men are moving, and that was a weapon being loaded!"

The metallic ring of a ramrod crushing a charge into a barrel came to their ears, but exactly from

Back to Mexico

what quarter was not certain. It was followed by a similar sound, and was repeated on several occasions.

"Let the men move. Tell them to separate, and run as soon as possible," whispered Roger. "The Spaniards must have got news of the attempt. Ah! there goes their signal!"

Suddenly the silence of the night was broken by the roar of an arquebus, while from some point high up amongst the houses came the flash of the ponderous weapon, lighting up the walls of Tlascala and the natives and Englishmen grouped at their base. The next instant all was pitch dark again, but there was no longer silence. A roar of angry voices filled the air, and a loud command was given in Spanish. It was followed by a sharp fusillade, which caused Roger and his friends to scatter, and struck some of them to the ground. A moment later a shout at the far end of the town told that the hundred men sent there were obeying instructions.

"Time to go," said Roger to Teotlili. "Separate, and do as I have said," he shouted out at the top of his voice. "Whatever you do, separate."

Some one took him by the arm, and he hurried off into the darkness. But he was by no means alone, for Teotlili was on one side and Tamba close on the other, while a strong body of men followed closely.

"Trust yourself to us," said Teotlili. "We know the ground well, and are accustomed to moving in the dark. Now, let us run, my lord, for in a little while the enemy will discover the ruse, and will come after us."

They set off at a run, but had gone only a little

Roger the Bold

way before shouts in front told that the enemy were there also.

"This way, my lord," whispered Teotlili. "Now, come at your swiftest pace. Ah, our friends are doing their work well, and will give us a little time, perhaps. We must make the most of their help."

By now the town of Tlascala and its surroundings was in an uproar, the first shot from the arquebus having been followed by a fusillade, and afterwards by dropping shots which were aimed haphazard into the crowd. Then shouts resounded from every side, Spanish and English and the Aztec tongues being mixed. Indeed, the combatants were all close together, hardly knowing where were friends or foes. But thanks to the care which Teotlili and his men had taken to get their bearings, the parties were able to make off in the darkness, and with the exception of a few meetings with the enemy, who were easily brushed aside, contrived to get away from the town.

"The horse!" said Teotlili, when he and Roger, with Tamba close behind, and their escort of natives had gone some little way; "I heard their trumpet-call, and there is the neigh of the animals. If they follow we shall be overtaken, for these strange animals travel quickly."

"On smooth ground," gasped Roger. "But we will lead on to rough ground if they come in our direction. Is there not a wood somewhere near?"

"There is a big one a mile from this," was the answer. "We shall be there in a little while."

"Then let us go at our fastest pace," cried Roger. "Once within the wood we can defy them."

After that there was silence, the men running as

Back to Mexico

swiftly as possible. Indeed, they could have gone even faster had it not been for the white friend whom they escorted. For though Roger's recent experiences had sharpened his powers of perception, he was no match for these Aztecs, who seemed to be able to find their way about as well by night as during the day. They avoided obstacles over which our hero would have stumbled, and many a time did Teotlili and Tamba, with a word or a touch on the arm, draw him to one side in time to escape a fall.

"My lord is different," whispered Tamba, as if to excuse his interference. "We, who are forest bred, or used to travel at night, see where he cannot see. Press on, and we will look to your safety. I hear the horsemen."

There was no doubt that the Spanish horsemen had saddled and galloped after the group which included their last prisoner, he who was to be hanged on the following morning, and probably their allies had been able to put them on that track. They came at a quick trot now, and Roger could distinctly hear the jingle of their accoutrements, and the stamping of the horses' feet, for the cavalry wisely kept to the road. Soon, however, they were forced to move from it, for the line of flight taken by Teotlili and his men led across country. A little later he turned to Roger with a cry of relief.

"The wood," he said. "It extends for some miles, and then opens into a bare country. Shall we make through it in the direction of Mexico?"

"And be caught at the other end," answered Roger, gasping for breath after the long run. "Let us reach its shelter first, and then we can decide."

A few minutes later the trees shadowed them, and

Roger the Bold

they crept amongst the trunks, the noble leading the way till the whole band had disappeared into the forest. Then he halted, the same curious sound came from his lips, and the party came to a stop, all throwing themselves on the ground.

"We are safe for a time," he said, coming to Roger's side, where the latter had thrown himself on the grass. "This wood extends some miles in the direction of Mexico, as I have already said, and if we push on we shall reach the farthest fringe before the dawn comes. Shall we do that, or have you better counsel to give?"

Roger thought for a little while before he ventured to answer.

"The wood extends some miles," he said at length. "Then the horsemen could not surround the whole?"

"But the footmen could. They have allies sufficient to cover every foot of the ground, my lord."

"At Tlascala they have," answered Roger, coolly, while he still gasped for breath. "They have the allies there in abundance, we all know. But the horsemen will arrive alone, and it will be long before the footmen follow. Will they not rather chase the other parties, leaving us to the Spanish horse?"

The question was an important one, and Teotlili was quick to decide it.

"I cannot say for certain," he said; "but it is more than likely that the horsemen alone are in chase. Give me a little while, and I can speak with full knowledge."

He rose to his feet and strode across to the men,

Back to Mexico

all of whom were seated listening, and none showing much sign of distress, for these Aztecs were always in wonderful condition. Then he gave an order, and a dozen of the natives rose and disappeared from view.

"They will be back before long," said Teotlili, "and they will be able to say for certain if the horsemen are alone. If they are, what do you propose?"

That too was a difficult question to answer, and for a little longer Roger lay on the grass, his head buried in his hands. Suddenly he turned to Teotlili.

"Have the men the courage to attack the horsemen?" he asked. "You are sure of that?" he went on, as Teotlili gave him an emphatic reply. "Then I have a little plan. These horsemen will be here within a little while, and much will depend on their captain's discretion. But if he hears us in the wood it is likely that he will dismount his men and send them in, leaving a small escort to guard the horses. Then this is the way in which we will act. When we hear the horses we will creep towards them, and then will induce the men to enter by breaking branches, and making so much noise as to lead them to think that we are forcing our way through the forest. If we hear the order given to dismount, we will creep to the very edge of the wood, while a dozen of our men will go on as before, luring the Spaniards in. Once they have gone some hundred paces we will attack the escort, kill them and scatter the horses. Then, don't you see, these horsemen will be no better than ourselves."

Roger the Bold

"They will be dismounted, and they will be in the forest, where we could kill every man easily," said Teotlili, with an exclamation of delight. "But we have no time for that. We must lure them in, and then escape. I will give the necessary instructions, and we will be ready to make for the edge of the wood as soon as we hear the enemy."

A little later the dull tramp of horses was heard, and one of the scouts came back with the information that the cavalry were close at hand, picking their way carefully over the rough ground. A few seconds later another came to Teotlili with the report that the horsemen were entirely alone, and that none of the native allies could be seen or heard.

"Then we can move," said the noble. "The horsemen are coming towards us from this side, and if we creep to the edge of the wood we shall be near enough to make an attack. Come, my lord, I will lead you as before."

"And I will give the signal for the attack and will head the men," whispered Roger. "Let them shout at my signal and rush out. There must be no delay. Warn them not to be frightened of the horses; they are nervous beasts which can be easily managed."

All was now silence in the forest, and as they crept to the edge, the edge by which they had come, voices in the distance could be heard, and of a sudden there was a loud command.

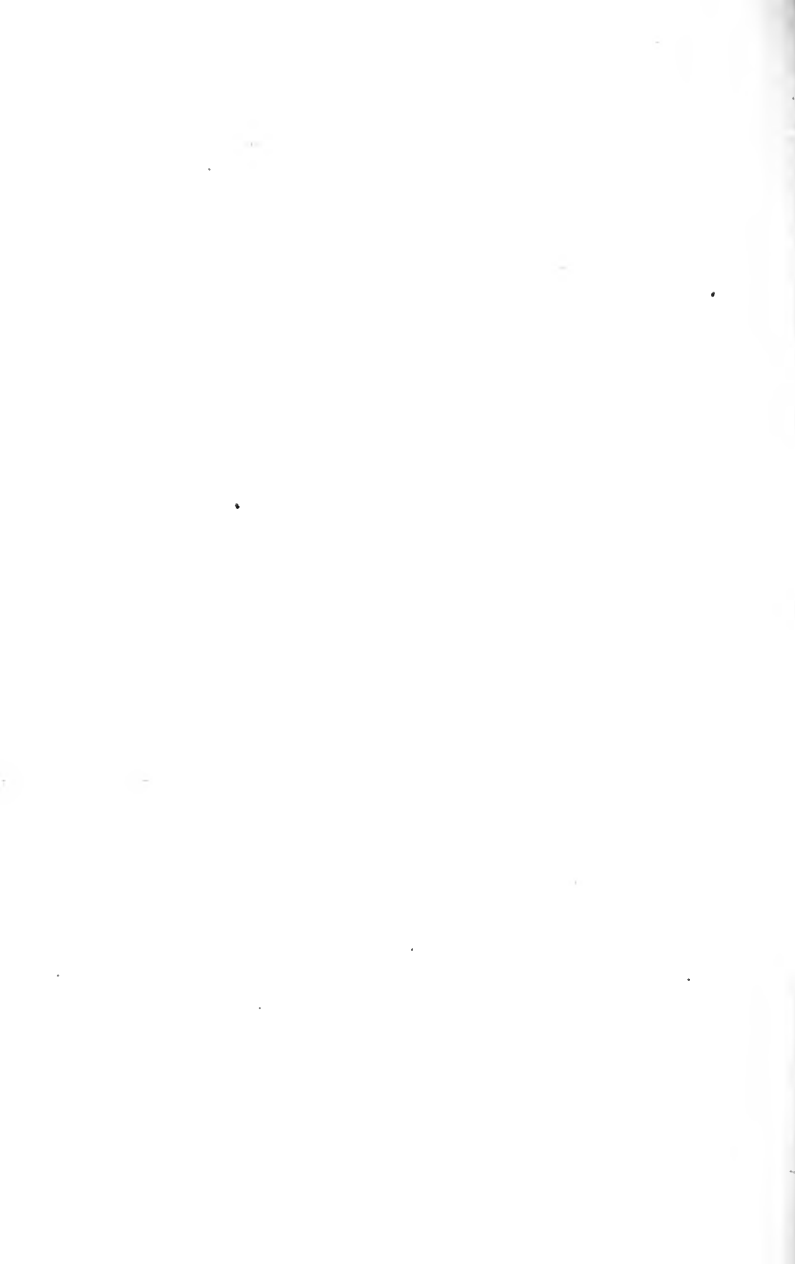
"These Mexicans seem to have sunk out of sight, doubtless in the forest. Halt! Now listen!"

"Stop!" called out Roger, softly, and at his voice all came to a halt. "Now, if only our men will



B 566

"THE REMAINDER WERE QUICKLY IN FULL FLIGHT"



Back to Mexico

begin to make as much commotion as possible, our plan may act."

"They will begin within a minute," whispered Teotlili. "I will send a man back to them."

It was wonderful the manner in which these Aztecs obeyed his orders. All, in fact, seemed to possess unusual intelligence, and it wanted only a few words of explanation to send them on some special mission. And so Teotlili had hardly spoken before a man was running swiftly back to the twelve comrades who had been left farther in. Then came the crash of breaking branches, and the noise which would be made by a band of men escaping blindly through a wood at night, escaping at such a pace, and so fearfully, that they did not look where they went, and took no precaution to avoid noise.

"Ha! the dogs make sounds which are as easy to follow as a bell!" exclaimed the same Spanish voice. "We will after them. Dismount. Now, let a dozen mount guard over the horses. The remainder follow me into the forest."

Again there was the jingle of spur and lance, the clatter of men's boots on rocky ground. Horses neighed, and many kicked, so that other sounds were almost drowned. Not those, however, from the depths of the forest. The crash of branches could still be heard, though dying away gradually.

"They are increasing their distance. Will you men take hours to dismount? Come, hasten, and let us get after them," shouted the eager commander of the Spaniards. "Now, all follow me, and we will take this Englishman, and kill those who have helped in his escape."

There was a babel of shouts. Men bellowed at

Roger the Bold

one another as they swung themselves from their saddles. Then, showing considerable confusion in the darkness, the Spaniards managed to select a guard for their horses, while the greater number followed their commander towards the forest. When they had arrived at the edge, they halted to let stragglers come up with them, and then dived into the dense shadow of the trees, passing within a few feet of the spot where Roger and his friends lay. But the Spaniards never suspected their presence there. Their attention was wholly occupied by the shouts ahead, and by the noise of men forcing a way through the underwood. They plunged on recklessly, and soon became separated, shouting loudly to one another so as to keep in touch. The moment had come for action. The Aztecs, who were helpless against horsemen in the open, and, indeed, feared even a handful, could easily outstrip any Spaniard if he were dismounted, and they now prepared to carry out the bold attempt planned by Roger. They crept from the shadows till the stamping of the horses told that they were near at hand. Then Roger rose to his full height, and drew his sword from his belt.

“Charge!” he shouted. “Cut them down, and then collect again. Follow me!”

He ran forward towards the spot where the horses were stationed, and threw himself upon the Spaniards, a dozen of whom were gathered there. An arquebus flashed in his face, and the contents roared past his ear, but he never paused till he had come to close quarters.

“Throw down your arms and surrender!” he shouted. Then, seeing that the Spaniards meant to

Back to Mexico

fight, he parried a blow aimed at him, and, raising his sword, struck the Spaniard over the head with such force that the man fell to the ground like a log. Then he engaged another, and was gradually driving him backward, when a dark figure leapt on the man from behind and dragged him to the earth. A moment later Tamba rose to his feet, dagger in hand, while the scuffling which had been going on all round suddenly ceased.

"That is the last, master," he said. "Listen to the men in the forest."

"Time to be moving away," said Roger, calmly. "Collect the men. Where is Teotlili?"

"Here," came the answer from close at hand. "I had to fight fiercely. I thought the man was dead, but he struggled for long, and held me. He is silent now. What are my lord's orders?"

"Listen to the Spaniards," said Roger. "They have heard the sound of the conflict, and are returning. We must be going. Collect here, and then cut the reins of the horses. Better still, give me a dagger, Tamba, and I will perform the task, for I am used to the animals. I will return in a few moments."

He went off to the horses, and passing fearlessly amongst them, had soon cut through the bridles of every one. In addition, he slit the leather of the stirrups, letting the irons drop to the ground.

"That is done," he said, when he had returned. "Now, let all shout and wave their arms."

At once a chorus of screams and shrill whistles sounded, while the men ran forward to the horses, waving their weapons over their heads. Roger took up a few stones and hurled them at the animals,

Roger the Bold

and these, with the strange sounds, and the numbers of figures moving in the darkness, so startled the Spaniards' horses that they commenced to move. One, the mount which had been ridden by the commander, reared up into the air, and gave vent to a loud squeal of terror. Then he lashed out his heels and bolted. The remainder were quickly in full flight, followed by the shouts of the Mexicans and by a shower of stones.

"Now we will go," said Roger, in tones of satisfaction, "and I place myself in your hands again, Teotlili. You know the way; lead me to Mexico."

"One moment, my lord," was the answer; "I will call the other men."

The Mexican lord put his fingers to his lips and sent a shrill whistle across the forest trees. It was answered from the far distance almost at once.

"They have done well," he said. "I gave them orders to lead on into the forest till the Spaniards were after them. Then they were to cut to the right, to get close to the edge of the trees. They were then to await my whistle, and after that to cut out to us. We can go now, my lord, and I think that we should meet with little more trouble."

He made his signal again, and at once the whole party set off at a quick run—a pace which any one of the Mexicans could keep up for hours together. For they were trained to this exercise, and made exceedingly mobile foot soldiers. As the party left the neighbourhood of the forest, they were followed by the angry shouts and by the fire of the Spaniards: But they took no notice of either, and after a little while left them behind.

"We can go at an easier pace now," said Teotlili.

Back to Mexico

“My lord is not used to running far, and the exercise exhausts him. I will give the order.”

Early on the following morning, as the light became sufficiently strong for them to see, they caught sight of Mexico in the distance, and at once relaxed their pace. They had been running and walking fast alternately for a long while, and Roger was completely done up. The wound which Alvarez had given him made running difficult, and he was glad therefore when the time came when they could take matters easily.

“We are safe now,” said Teotlili. “We will obtain a palanquin at the first village, and have you carried in.”

Roger accepted the proposal with alacrity, and a palanquin being forthcoming, he was borne into the city of Mexico in state. Rumours of his capture and of his escape had preceded him, and the populace turned out in force to welcome their god of air.

“We greet you with joy,” said the king, shaking his hand eagerly as he emerged from the palanquin. “It was a sad day when we heard that you were taken, particularly as we hear that the enemy march for Mexico within a few hours. Rest now, and later we will parade all the crossbow men and the men with lances, for there will be much to do to prepare for the attack.”

Two days later the outlying pickets of the Mexicans came into contact with the Spaniards and their allies, and the first skirmish took place—a skirmish which was merely the prelude to a long course of bitter fighting in and around the city of Mexico.

CHAPTER XVI

The First Encounter

ROGER was back in Mexico—the city upon the water where he had once been taken as a captive, and where he was now received with the welcome of its many thousands, and with the grateful friendship of its nobles and king; and with him now he had his own countrymen, for of the thirty-four who had been rescued from the prison at Tlascala, twenty-six had survived, Sir Thomas being amongst the unfortunate ones who had been killed by the fire of the Spaniards.

“We owe our lives to you, undoubtedly,” said Philip, a couple of days later, when the two stood on one of the tall towers looking down on the city; “for had you not decided to stay in your prison unless we also were rescued, these Mexicans would never have made the attempt. That we have learned already, for Tamba speaks a few words of English, and I can manage to understand a little of the Aztec language. We have been talking matters over—I and Peter Tamworth and the others. All our leaders are gone, and the few gentlemen adventurers left do not care to lead, nor would we have them if they did. We wish you to take the command of our party, and to make the best arrangements to get us

The First Encounter

back to England. For the present we are pledged to carry out your wishes."

"And I am pledged to defend this city," said Roger, with emphasis, while he flushed with pride at the honour which his old comrades were doing him.

"I will take this post which you offer—for the present, at any rate; for, you see, here in Mexico——"

"They speak of you as the god of air, we hear," smiled Philip. "I am not surprised, for you are so tall and so big, and then you can fight. I have also learned of the ruse played on the Spanish horsemen. It was cleverly thought of. I do not wonder that you are the Mexicans' leader, and it would be impossible for any of our party to oust you. The Mexicans would kill them promptly. Tell me how you gained their liking."

"Gladly," answered Roger. "And do you let me know how the brigantine was captured, and how she fared after I was left. And that brings me to the tale of the disc. That Spaniard, Alvarez, turned out a rogue. He nearly killed me, and he has the golden treasure now, I believe. I looked for him in Tlascala, but did not see him."

"And I caught sight of him once only," answered Philip. "He kept away from us, and I am told went off to some other city on the commandant's service."

"We shall meet him again, never fear," said Roger, after a little while. "But listen to my tale, Philip, and you will see that our expedition is not yet hopelessly ruined. If we can defend Mexico successfully, and can capture this Alvarez and the

Roger the Bold

disc, we shall return to England with riches sufficient to gratify every one."

They sat down on the edge of the tower and discussed the matter for a long while, our hero telling of the promise made by the Mexicans that he should be rewarded for his services, and should carry away as much as he desired. Then he listened while Philip told of the adventures of the men who remained aboard the brigantine, and of how they were captured.

"And now we come to the time when you are our leader, and we are to face these Spaniards again," said Philip. "Tell us what we are to do, for you have twenty-six men, all of whom can act as officers."

"Then let us seek out Peter Tamworth, and ask his advice," answered Roger, thoughtfully. "He is a mariner of long experience, and he will be able to tell us how to meet these brigantines, or perhaps even how to make one for service on the lake."

They descended from the tower, and in due course came upon Peter, looking wonderfully grand in his feathered cloak and native dress, for all had been re clothed, their own dress being torn to ribbons.

"'Tis out of the question, this thought of building a brigantine for use on the lake," he answered promptly. "You say that there is news that Cortes is now on his way here, and that fighting has commenced. A brigantine would take months to build, while something smaller would take almost as long. But we could contrive something with rafts of light material. Or better, my commandant, make stout boats by lashing some four or five of these canoes together. They do not use sails, but there is enough

The First Encounter

cotton here to make them ; and a boat such as I describe should cut fast through the water, and stand a chance if it came to warfare. But the brigantines would knock her to pieces if she got in their way. That is where their advantage will be felt. None of these canoes will be able to stand against them."

"Then we will do what we can, and you shall take command on the water," said Roger. "We will go to Teotlili and the king and make our arrangements. Then I will appoint one each of our men to the bands of crossbow and lance-bearing soldiers, and let them carry on the training. There will be ample weapons, for all the artificers in the city have been at work."

By dint of strenuous labour Roger and his friends, with the able and cordial assistance of the king and Teotlili, managed to get together quite a respectable number of the Mexicans, and during the two days which they had free to themselves, and the few which followed during which Cortes and his allies marched down to the lake and visited Tezcuco, were able to appoint each one of the English men-at-arms or adventurers to the band. Then those who had already been trained in the use of the new weapons were divided up, and set to work to instruct their comrades. Meanwhile, Peter Tamworth had taken the matter of the boats in hand, and ere a day had passed had constructed some twenty broad canoes, lashing four of the native vessels side by side. Sails were a matter of greater difficulty, and it took time to teach the Mexicans to use them, for hitherto they had used the paddle alone. However, at the end of a week

Roger the Bold

they were fairly proficient; and when at length the enemy did come in touch, had some confidence in themselves. It was an eventful day when Cortes marched down to Mexico, and took up his position, and a still more exciting moment when his men advanced to attack the forts which had been erected at the opening of the aqueducts.

"Let the men lie down behind the walls," said Roger, who was in command. "They are to take no notice of the cannon, and are to stay quiet till I give the order to rise. Even then those with the lance will remain where they are, for it is my object to lute these Spaniards on till they are at close quarters."

He took up a commanding post in the centre of one of the long walls which had been constructed, and watched the enemy closely. There were some three hundred Spaniards, and many thousands of their allies, and they advanced across the open directly against the wall, dragging their guns with them. Arrived within two hundred yards they halted, and after a little while the guns opened fire, the shot screeching over the wall, and falling into the lake behind. At the sound several Mexicans rose, and would have retired.

"Tell them that they will be instantly executed if they show fear," called out Roger to Teotlilli, who was a few paces away. "How can cannon balls hurt when we have a thick wall to defend us? Bid them carry out my order."

The Mexican noble turned and repeated the words in stern tones.

"We will set an example to any who may show fear," he said. "Consider that you are fighting for

The First Encounter

home and children. Let no one say that we were afraid of a noise."

The words seemed to hearten the men, and though the guns continued firing for some little while, no one moved, no one was hit, and only a few bricks were dashed from the wall. It was plain that there was nothing to be done in this manner, and the Spanish commander gave an order.

"We will advance against them," he said, in scornful tones. "They will run when they see our swords. Let the men with sword and buckler march on the right, and those with lances on the left. The men with the crossbows can be on either flank."

They formed at once, and came forward at a smart pace, looking so numerous, with thousands of the native allies swarming about them, that the Mexicans again showed signs of losing heart. But Roger soon reassured them. He leaped on to the wall, where all could see him, and called to Teotlili—

"Let the crossbow-men prepare their weapons and creep up to the back of the wall," he said; "and shout to those stationed in the canoes to come close to the shore. When I call out, they are to fire into the enemy. The men with the lances are to form up at either end of the wall, and are to be ready to rush out on the Spaniards and their allies. Let all follow my shout with another."

The order was promptly repeated, and Roger, looking down from his high perch, saw that all was in readiness. The faces of the Mexicans now showed eagerness and determination; for the sight of their leader standing there with the Spanish shafts flying

Roger the Bold

past him, gave them courage. A little while ago they had found it hard to stand up to the Spaniards, but now they had learned something. They had seen this youth defy them and hoodwink their horsemen, and they argued that if he could do that, then they also might hope for success. Therefore the men silently crept to the back of the wall, while the lancers, each with one of the English to command them, stole softly to either end, and waited the moment for battle. It came sooner than they expected.

“Take them with a rush!” shouted the Spanish leader. “Now, charge down on them!”

He and his men gave vent to a chorus of shouts, which was followed by those of the natives, and by their curious shrill whistles. Then the whole mass dashed forward impetuously, aiming for the wall which had been erected across the approach to the aqueduct.

“Ready!” shouted Roger, and at the signal, some thousand voices took up the shout, while the top of the wall was lined with the heads and shoulders of the crossbow-men. Then numbers of canoes dashed from under the aqueduct, and ferrying in close to the shore, came to a stop. At once a cloud of shafts sang in the direction of the enemy, and some score of their numbers fell to the ground. But it did not even cause the Spaniards to hesitate, though many of the allies came to a sudden halt. They repeated their shout, and dashed forward at an even greater pace, their swords above their heads, and their bucklers ready before them to keep off the shafts. The lancemen on the left, however, had little protection, and a nod from Roger caused

The First Encounter

Teotlili to direct the aim of the majority against them.

"Get the men with the lance ready," called out Roger, "and bid them dash against the Spaniards with the same weapon while they are confused with the loss caused by the crossbow-men. And, Philip!"

The young fellow who had been such a friend of his aboard the brigantine ran up to his side, his sword, one taken from the enemy, over his shoulder.

"I am here," he said, a glint in his eye showing that he also was ready for the attack.

"You will take your own band of lancemen, and will wait till I raise my hand, for the noise is too great for a shout to be heard at a distance. When I signal, throw yourself on the flanks of the swordsmen. I shall make a frontal attack at the same time. Now go."

Roger might have led an army before by the manner in which he spoke, and by the sharpness with which he gave his orders. And those under his command seemed to appreciate the fact that he was their leader and well able to direct them, for they sprang to obey. Philip lifted his sword, swung round, and ran off to his men. Meanwhile the babel of shouts had increased, the men on the canoes screaming as if they wished to drown the shouts and the whistles of the natives ashore. And no doubt these same battle-cries helped to keep up their courage. They poured shafts from their new weapons into the Spanish lance-bearers, and those behind the wall coming to their aid, the enemy in this part of the field suddenly halted, while men

Roger the Bold

dropped from the ranks. Then they turned and ran for their lives, a sight which roused the Mexicans to the highest pitch of excitement. But still the Spaniards who were on the right, and who bore sword and buckler, pressed on, though not at such a swift pace; their ardour was already damped by the unexpected opposition met with.

Roger motioned to Teotlili. "Order all with the bow to pour their fire into the swordsmen!" he shouted. Then he turned to where Philip waited in expectation, and saw that he was ready.

"In a little while," he said to himself, though it was as much as he could do to hold his hand. "The time for launching the flank attack has not yet come. Ah, now the bolts begin to tell, for they are within fifty yards! I will make the signal."

He stood to his full height, and lifted his arm. Then he leaped from the wall, and ran to where another body of lancemen stood waiting further orders, the same who had been instructed to throw themselves on to the left flank of the enemy.

"Follow me!" he shouted, drawing his sword. "Lances up! Form into line! Now forward!"

It was a formidable array which he led, and the natives who followed did so with the utmost determination. They ran in a close body from behind the wall, wheeled steadily, and then, with a great shout, threw themselves against the flank of the swordsmen. At the same moment Philip brought his command against the opposite side. Then indeed was the air filled with shouts and shrieks. The Spaniards fought fiercely, cutting at the heads of the lances. But there were more behind, and they were forced to give way; but they could not

The First Encounter

turn, for to do so would be to be run through instantly.

“Charge!” bellowed Roger, at the top of his voice. “Do not give them time to rally; but press them.”

Not one of the Aztecs understood his words, but all heard his shout; and when they saw their young leader throw himself impetuously on the Spaniards with his sword, they gathered together and rushed forward with their lances. At the same time those who had been trained to follow in rear of the men who held the lances dashed through the gaps in their ranks, and fell upon the enemy furiously; indeed, never before had the Spaniards met with such fierce opposition or such strenuous attack. On former occasions their numerous allies had been able to help them, for they had an unbounded faith in their masters, just as the Mexicans had in Roger. But these new methods of warfare astounded and disheartened them, and the shafts from the crossbows did the rest. They retreated early in the encounter, leaving the Spaniards to themselves. Then the lance-bearers amongst Cortes' men gave way, leaving only the swordsmen. It was an opportunity, and Roger and his men took it.

“Coming!” shouted Philip, as he saw his friend dash out against the head of the enemy. “Now, into their very centre!”

He flung his men on the flank of the swordsmen, and combining with Roger's part, caused the Spaniards to stagger. A number fell, pierced by the lances; then the remainder turned and attempted to flee. But the active natives were on them promptly, and of the number who had

Roger the Bold

advanced at a run to the attack, only a few returned to their friends; the rest were slain, and lay where they fell.

"Let the men retire!" said Roger to Teotlili, as his lancemen began to gather together again, looking as if they would like to push on to the camp of the enemy. "Tell them to get behind the wall again, and wait for orders. These trained bands are too valuable to have their lives thrown away."

Accordingly the Mexican noble whistled shrilly, and very soon all were back behind the wall. But their feelings now were very different. They had, for the very first time since they had met with the Spaniards, defeated them in the open, and their jubilation was great.

"Truly the manœuvre was well planned and most effective," said Teotlili, as he came to Roger's side. "The king was looking at us as we fought, and his messenger has just come with his thanks."

"Then tell him that we must fail next time," answered Roger, calmly. "The enemy will bring up all their strength, and we shall be forced to give way. But we can renew the conflict elsewhere. Let him keep that in mind, and not show displeasure or disappointment if we are beaten. And, Teotlili——"

"What next, my lord?"

"Make complete arrangements for the retirement of the men. Some must take to the boats, while others can run by means of the aqueduct. All the crossbow-men are to retire last, and are to harass the enemy as they go. They can lie off in the canoes and fire from the water."

The First Encounter

The Mexicans made the most of the lull in the fighting, and whilst the Spaniards gathered in their camp, discussing the unexpected turn of events, Roger and his friends perfected their arrangements for retirement, for it was clear to all that prolonged resistance could not be offered. And, indeed, they soon had cause to congratulate themselves on their caution; for Cortes was roused by the failure of his attack, and within an hour he sent his complete force against the wall, some seven hundred Spaniards attacking with unparalleled fury. Roger and his command resisted with determination, and held the wall till it was obvious that further delay would be disastrous. Then Teotlili put his fingers to his lips and sounded a shrill whistle.

"That is the signal," he said, "and the men with the lances are even now retiring by the aqueduct. We will give them a little while, and then the others can go."

"But we must beat the enemy back before they move!" exclaimed Roger. "For otherwise they would be in our ranks before we were clear. Let them collect here, and we will dash out at them with a hundred lances."

Again the prudence of their young English leader helped the Mexicans, and when the call came for a hundred of the lancemen to stay, a thousand eagerly offered their services. However, Teotlili soon picked out a chosen band, while the others retired swiftly, and without being seen. Then the crossbow-men were ordered to increase their fire, till the attackers were confused.

"Now we will charge," said Roger, placing himself at the head of the men. "Once we have met

Roger the Bold

them, let every one turn and run as you give the signal."

Half an hour later the whole command was back in Mexico, very few men having been lost, while the Spaniards had had numbers killed or wounded, and their native allies had suffered heavily. Then for an hour the crossbow-men kept up a stinging fire, while the enemy destroyed the landward end of the aqueduct.

"It is a misfortune which cannot be helped," said Teotlili, as he watched the process of destruction, "and it would have been better for us had the people taken your advice, and sent all the women and children away to the hills. But the times are strange ones. We of Mexico have many enemies, and it is likely that our womenkind might fall amongst those who are unfriendly. Still, their presence here adds to the mouths to be filled, and to the numbers requiring water. For that we must rely upon the large storage tanks which we have constructed. And now, my lord, what arrangements shall be made with regard to the brigantines?"

They went in search of Peter Tamworth, while their lookouts posted on the summit of every temple sent them word of the movements of the enemy. And very soon they learned that the brigantines were afloat in the lake, and were to be expected very soon.

"Then, we will send out a fleet to meet them," said Roger, with decision. "I grant that our chances are not very great, but it happens that there is very little wind, and in a light breeze our small canoes can paddle faster than one of these Spanish vessels, while our new craft can sail with

The First Encounter

them, at least, if they cannot outstrip them. We will try what huge numbers and a fierce attack will do."

"And meanwhile I will communicate the news which has just reached me," said Teotlili. "Our scouts and spies have obtained full information of the movements of the enemy, and of their method of attack. He is a crafty man, this Malinché, and he is closing a huge net about us. Already he has marched his men completely round the lake, and now he has divided them into three divisions."

"An arrangement which we have foreseen," Roger reminded him. "We are prepared for combined attack from three or more quarters, and for one from the lake side itself."

"Then these are the commanders and their positions, the information being reliable. Pedro de Alvarado will go to Tlacuba, which lies close to the post which we have just defended, and is at the end of the shorter causeway. He commands thirty horsemen, some twenty with crossbow or musket, and twenty thousand native allies. In addition, he will have one hundred and fifty soldiers armed with sword and buckler.

"Cristoval de Olid has a force of like proportions, except that he will command more of the allies, and he will take post at Cuyoacan, a town at the entrance of a second short causeway, and one which runs to the main causeway outside the city.

"Gonzalo de Sandoval will take charge of the third force, and will have as many as thirty thousand allies, and Spaniards equal in numbers to the other commanders, only fifty of his swordsmen will be picked soldiers, who are to act as a bodyguard to

Roger the Bold

Malinché when he joins the troops. But we shall see, my lord. It may be that a bodyguard even will be unable to protect them. This third force will go to Iztapalapa, and march on to the main causeway, where they will fight their way, with the object of coming to the junction of the smaller causeway and there meeting their friends under De Olid. They will be supported by the brigantines, which will have all the sailors aboard, as well as fighting men, and will be commanded by Malinché himself."

"Then we must make a special effort against them," said Roger. "As to the junction being formed, that is a matter which we must put a stop to. We must do all that we can to delay the advance, and, if possible, we must lure the attacking divisions on singly, so as to destroy them one by one."

The plans of the Spaniards needed a large amount of consideration on the part of the Mexicans, and Roger and the king, with Teotlili and other nobles, spent many hours in discussing the means of defence. That Cortes had made clever arrangements for the siege and taking of the city could not be denied, and his first action had shown his astuteness; for he had cut off the water supply, well knowing that the resistance of the Mexicans depended largely on this. Then, too, his decision to assail the city from three separate points at one and the same time was a wise one, for thereby he engaged every one of the defenders, and none could rest. This in itself was a serious matter, for though the Mexican numbers were huge, their whole force would be compelled to remain alert, if not actually

The First Encounter

engaged, ready to reinforce any part specially threatened. The troops under Cortes, on the other hand, were even more numerous, and some could rest while their comrades were fighting; for the causeways gave limited space, and it was impossible for all to come to close quarters with the enemy.

As to the points from which his attacks were to be launched, they were undoubtedly the best under the circumstances, though, had he wished, he could have selected a fourth, thereby launching his men along each end of the main causeway, and by each one of the branches which led into it. But he was too astute to block up the path of retreat. He recognised that even with all his allies he had an enormous host to contend with, and that all were filled with desperation and determination. His spies had told him that, and also that amongst the allies who had come into the city there were some who, like those outside, might in time waver. It would be wise policy to give them a free outlet to escape, and thereby reduce the numbers of the defenders. And to further this solution he took care to send messages to these friends of the Mexicans, offering every inducement to cause them to waver in their allegiance.

His arrangements made, as Teotlili had correctly reported, Cortes no sooner saw the aqueduct destroyed, than he sent his divisions to their posts, and caused the brigantines to be floated. A glance at the plan of Mexico will show the camps of the Spaniards, and the reader will be able to see the construction of the causeways. One running directly from shore to shore, through the heart of the city, while a second—that by which Pedro de Alvarado

Roger the Bold

was to force an entrance—cut out from the shore to what might be described as the back of Mexico. For this fine city was situated at one end of the lake, within easy distance of the shore to which the causeways connected it, while its face might be said to look out to the vast expanse of salt lake on which the brigantines had just been floated. And these latter could attack this side alone and the long causeway running through the heart of the city, for the latter presented a barrier through which only canoes could pass. There were three other causeways or viaducts, one of which De Olid was to march by, while the other two were small and insignificant, and ran from the north-western shore.

A few words will describe the preparations of the defenders, many carried out at the suggestion of Roger. Numerous breaches had been constructed along the causeways, planks being left for the use of the Mexicans. Then barricades had been built of sun-dried bricks at the back of these breaches, and crossbow shafts piled there, with an ample supply of lances and other weapons. Canoes lay on either side, ready to hamper the attackers in every possible manner, while all carried long poles with hooks at the end.

It must not be imagined that the Mexicans allowed each party to fight independent of the others, for to have done so would have led to early disaster; but, as Cortes had anticipated, they held a huge force in reserve, and their operations were directed from the central and tallest tower of all, from the summit of which all the causeways, the lake, and, in fact, the whole fighting arena, could be

The First Encounter

seen. Thus prepared, with a store of water and of food, and with arrangements made whereby fresh provisions were brought in from the northern shore by canoe or by the open causeway every day, the Mexicans, with their gallant young king and Roger at their head, looked for the coming of the enemy, and particularly for the sailing of the fleet of brigantines. Nor had they long to wait, for by now the canal which Cortes had caused to be dug at Tezcucó was completed and joined to the lake, and very soon the brigantines were floating on the surface of the vast basin, at the far corner of which was situated the city of Mexico. Then the report came that their masts were erected, and soon they were steering down the lake, propelled by a light breeze.

"There is a stir in the camps of the enemy also," said Teotlilí, receiving a message from one of the lookouts. "Our men are prepared on the causeways, and we are expecting attack."

"Then we will set out in the canoes as soon as the brigantines are within a few leagues," answered Roger. "I will go now to the port and prepare to sail."

An hour later he, with Philip to keep him company, set foot on one of the bulky craft constructed of several canoes, and put off from Mexico. They were followed by Peter and a host of the Mexicans, some in the larger craft which were propelled by sails, and more in the single canoes urged by means of paddles. The whole fleet steered from the city towards the enemy, and met them some three leagues away, where they lay, the brigantines swaying to and fro, their canvas flapping idly, for there was now no wind at all.

Roger the Bold

“Nothing could be more favourable,” exclaimed Roger. “We will attack at once, and before they get a breeze to help them.”

The cotton sheets which were hoisted aboard the larger craft were lowered, and paddles seized. Then the fleet of canoes dashed forward, forty or more making for each brigantine.

CHAPTER XVII

A Fleet of Brigantines

BOOM! A cannon-shot thundered from the nearest brigantine, and a ball ploughed its way through the very heart of the fleet of Mexican canoes. Boom! a second shot rang out, and was followed by a fusillade, which was helped from each one of the ships.

“Forward!” called out Teotlili, who was with Roger and Philip. “Take no heed of their shot, but close in and scramble aboard. Our numbers will overwhelm them.”

“Shout to the men to separate,” called out Roger; “then there will be less chance of being hit. Now, push on. A breeze would ruin our chances.”

“And one is coming, my leader,” said Peter, mournfully, pointing to the sky. “There is wind there, and it will fill the sails before we can get to this fleet. They are a long cannon-shot from us yet, and there is time for them to gather way. Better perhaps to retire.”

“Better to risk disaster than do that,” exclaimed Roger, sharply. “To retire would be to dishearten the men. Forward! We will make a brave attempt to capture them.”

He urged the rowers to get the bulky craft ahead

Roger the Bold

of the others, and, thanks to the fact that more than thirty were plying the paddles, the boat shot ahead and took the lead. Then Roger pointed to the largest of the brigantines.

"Run us aboard that," he said in peremptory tones, "and, Philip, prepare to follow me over the side. The natives will come after us willingly, and with a rush we may capture the craft. Now, push on, push on!"

His eye shifted from the brigantines to the sky, and back to the surface of the lake. It was ruffled already, he noticed, and the large, flapping sails of the enemy's fleet flapped louder still, while some bellied. It was a question of time, he knew, for if the brigantines could get the wind, and a good one, too, they could sail away from the canoes, could circle round them, and deluge the Mexicans with shot. Worse still, these bulky vessels, the like of which had never appeared on the lake before in the memory of man, would, if they were sailed boldly down upon the canoes of the Mexicans, overwhelm them, and ride over them as if they were straws floating in the water. It was a race, and Roger and his men made strenuous efforts to win it.

"They are off. Look at their sails. They are under way! Master Roger, 'twould be better to beat a retreat."

Peter took him by the sleeve, but our hero shook him off.

"We have men to spare, even if the whole fleet be sunk," he said, "and at this stage of the battle it is better to risk all than to set a bad example. Let us show the Spaniards that we will not be conquered

A Fleet of Brigantines

without a struggle. Come, take the tiller, and set us aboard."

He was inflexible now that he had given his orders, and, come what might, was determined to give battle to the enemy.

"It may seem unwise," he said to himself over and over again, "but it is a necessary act, I am sure. Besides, if we could cripple one of the brigantines only it would be something gained, even at the cost of thousands of lives. And, if the wind is really coming steadily, they would be after us if we retired, and would treat us just as badly as they can do now. No. Attack is the only thing for us, and we will see it through."

By now the two fleets were rapidly approaching one another—the Spaniards moving slowly through the water, with their sails only half filled, while the Mexican fleet advanced at a swifter pace, propelled by paddles. Those who were free to do so answered the cannon-shots with shouts and shrill whistles, while every canoe showed a number of dusky figures brandishing their arms. Occasionally a shot would strike one of the tiny craft, and she would sink at once, the occupants swimming away to others, or turning their heads toward the city. Roger hardly noticed these, however. His eye was fixed upon the large brigantine, which he was determined to capture. And those aboard her evidently saw his object, for they trained a gun upon him and took careful aim.

"'Tis the dog of a white giant," said the gunner who trained the piece. "Stand back, while I blow him to atoms!"

He waved his comrades to one side and squinted

Roger the Bold

along the sight. Then he raised his head and peered over the side.

"The breeze comes stronger," he said with a husky laugh, "and maybe the gun will not be required. But I will try. I would give a gold doubloon to be able to strike the head from that fellow."

Once more his eye went to the piece, and he adjusted the aim minutely. Then he touched the vent with his port-fire and sprang away. There was a roar, a spout of smoke and flame flew from the brigantine's side, and a shot hummed over the craft in which Roger stood.

"A close ball," he remarked with a laugh. "The Spaniards have singled us out and hope to sink us. But we shall be there before they can repeat the attempt. Warn the men to be ready."

Teotlili did as he was asked, and then stood beside his friend, both watching the gunner aboard the brigantine. By now they were much closer, and it was possible to make out his figure distinctly, and even to see his features.

"A face which I have good cause to know," exclaimed Roger, suddenly, staring at the enemy. "That is Alvarez, the traitor who stole the golden sign and afterwards nearly stabbed me to death. There is added reason for capturing that vessel. Urge the rowers on, Teotlili. Time is of the utmost importance."

Time was, in fact, of more than the utmost importance. Every minute brought added freshness to the wind, and the brigantines, which a little while before had lain there rolling lazily, were now running free, and churning up a salt wave at their bows. It became no longer a race, for the Spaniards now

A Fleet of Brigantines

bore down upon the fleet of Mexican canoes ; but it was simply a question of where the combatants would meet, and whether the canoes would be able to grapple with the enemy.

"We shall be stove in and sunk at once," said Peter ; "and now it is too late to retire. Better give orders to all to seize the vessel and abandon this."

"Whereby we shall make sure of her capture," exclaimed Roger. "A good thought, Peter, and the order shall be given. Tell all the crew to spring for the rail and fight their way on to the deck, Teotlili. Let them desert this craft, for it will be useless. Ah! the distance grows less. That ruffian is about to fire."

He pointed to the bows of the brigantine, to the figure posted there, now without doubt that of Alvarez. He was peering over the rail again, waiting for the craft to come to closer quarters, and the smoke of his port-fire could be seen as he blew upon it.

"For the god of air!" he shouted out, catching sight of Roger and waving the brand. "This will send him quicker to his end than would the stroke of a dagger. One minute and he and his men will be blown from the water."

He shook his fist at the approaching canoe, and then bent to his sights again.

"Put us over a little," said Roger, quietly, touching Peter's arm to attract his attention. "Now, Teotlili, let the men stop rowing."

Paddles were at once drawn from the water, while the way on the craft allowed her to be steered to one side. She shot to the left, while the brigantine held on her course. Almost at the same

Roger the Bold

moment Alvarez blew on his port-fire again and applied it to the vent, sending a charge of small shot tearing through the air, to strike the surface of the lake within a few feet of the canoe.

"Row, and put us over again," shouted Roger. "That is right. She will strike us within a minute, and we must climb. Put her nose up as the brigantine gets close, and then she will not roll us over."

There was a moment of confusion while the orders were carried out. But Peter was an excellent seaman, and had been in dangerous work before. He held his tiller firmly, beckoned to the rowers to give a few strokes with their paddles, and then, just as the stem of the brigantine bore up for the broadside of the craft, he put his helm over again, causing the enemy's vessel to sail smoothly alongside.

"Aboard her! Cling to her rails," shouted Roger, springing to that side of the canoe and leaping for the deck of the brigantine. He was followed by every man aboard, and ere a minute had passed some fifty natives were hanging to the brigantine—some half upon the deck, while others merely retained a grip of the rail. As for their canoe, it swung round till the stern was caught by the brigantine, which happened to roll at that instant. The impact caused the Mexican craft to crumple up as if she had been made of paper, and before any one could have thought it possible it had gone to the bottom. It was a desperate situation for the attackers, and all recognized that victory must be won if they wished to live. One by one they scrambled on to the deck, though a few were flung off by the Spaniards. But the latter had been taken by surprise at the sudden manœuvre of the Mexicans, and before they could

A Fleet of Brigantines

dash along to that side, Roger and Peter and Philip stood firmly upon the deck, with some forty natives beside them.

“Charge before they can use their muskets and crossbows!” shouted Roger. “St. George! St. George! Follow to the stern.”

His sword was held firmly in his hand, and he had long ago donned his steel cap. With that to protect him, and a thickly padded cotton jerkin over his chest, he flung himself upon the astounded Spaniards recklessly, his eye searching for Alvarez. Men opposed him, and dashed at him with their swords. But he hardly seemed to notice. His deft blade put the thrusts and cuts aside, while his furious blows cut his assailants down. One man even discharged a musket in his face, the bullet tearing over his head, while the flames from the discharge singed his hair. But Roger hardly noticed the incident, for at that very moment he had caught sight of the crafty Alvarez standing in rear of his comrades, where he had run from the bows.

“Ah, Alvarez the traitor!” he shouted scornfully, while the Spaniard glared at Roger like a tiger. “Alvarez the traitor, who took us all in and deceived us. Well, within a minute I shall be with you, and then there shall be payment of my debt. Let every one who comes within reach of that man secure him alive, for I want him. And be sure to take him with the satchel which he wears beneath his arm.”

Roger's quick eye had seen the same bag in which he had brought the golden sign ashore now secured over Alvarez's shoulder, and doubtless containing the coveted disc—the plaque which held the secret of the Mexican treasure, and which, if he could only

Roger the Bold

secure it, would lead to an immense reward for himself and the expedition; that is, supposing he and his comrades escaped from Mexico, which was not at all certain. In the meanwhile they had their hands sufficiently full, for as they fought on the deck of the Spanish brigantine, the other vessels sailing beneath the flag of Castile bore down upon them, churning their way through a mass of canoes, which were swamped for all the world as though they were but tiny shells. None of the Mexican craft could withstand these heavy vessels—not even those constructed by Peter Tamworth. The huge prows of the brigantines crashed into them and bore them down, rolling them and their freight over, and sending the canoes to the bottom. The natives, however, could swim like fish, and while numbers made vain attempts to clamber aboard the brigantines, others swam to their comrades or turned for the long swim home. But they had to contend with more than water alone, for as the brigantines ran, the Spanish plied the enemy with their guns, using small shot, one of which was sufficient to wreck a canoe, while broadsides often slew fifty and more of the unfortunate Mexicans. Then the crossbow-men aboard turned to the brigantine on which Roger and his friends fought, sending their shafts amongst them.

“Tell some of our men to keep down that fire,” gasped Roger, halting for a moment and turning to Teotlili. “Now, Peter and Philip, one more effort and we will drive these Spaniards out into the lake. Shoulder to shoulder, and bring up some of the natives with the lances. We will make a capture, and will take this fellow Alvarez; for see, the disc is hanging to his shoulder.”

A Fleet of Brigantines

They gathered into a close body again, and at a shout from our hero advanced along the deck at a run. The Spaniards opposed them stubbornly, but the lances kept the swordsmen well away, while the crossbows held the fire from the nearest brigantines. And while the lances hampered the enemy, Roger and his two comrades, together with a number of the Mexicans who were armed with their obsidian swords, dashed into close quarters, and struck fiercely at their opponents. There was a desperate mêlée, a struggle, the fate of which hung in the balance, and a conflict at which Alvarez the traitor stared as if he were dumfounded. He was cornered. He saw before him men who were determined to win, and men, moreover, who had a personal enmity for himself. He remembered his treachery—the dastardly blow which he had struck at the young giant fighting in the very centre of the ship's deck, and he trembled now for the consequences. He stood with the port-fire still smouldering in his hand, and a look of terror on his face. Then seeing his comrades slowly giving way, he dived below and disappeared for a moment.

“He is a coward at heart,” shouted Roger, who had kept an eye on him. “He has slunk below the deck, and there we shall find him. Now, one rush and we shall have the craft.”

“He has come up again. What devil's trick is he playing?” suddenly exclaimed Philip. “See him; he has something in his hand! He is laying a train!”

“And will blow the brigantine up! The villain!” shouted Roger. Let us get to him before he can apply the match.”

Roger the Bold

They made frantic efforts to come at Alvarez, and their terrific blows forced the enemy back. Then Roger rushed like a maddened bull into the very centre of the Spaniards, and with a shout of consternation they gave way and ran to the stern. But they were not allowed to pause there, for the Mexicans were now fully roused. The lances were levelled, and the natives came at a run full tilt at their enemies. It was a desperate situation for the Spaniards. They had to choose between death from those lances and the swords of the Englishmen, or a leap into the lake and the possibility of being rescued by their friends or of being taken by the enemy.

“Jump!” shouted Alvarez; “they shall not have the vessel. “Jump! I have made a train ready and will fire it. Now overboard, every man of you.”

He glanced along the deck, gave Roger a look which spoke volumes, and which threatened unutterable reprisals, and then blew on his match.

“We will send their god of air higher than he had hoped,” he shouted with a derisive laugh. “We will send him to the skies, and in little pieces. Farewell, Roger de Luce, onetime lieutenant aboard the brigantine, and now Roger the Cacique, lord of Mexico. We shall not meet again.”

The lances were within four yards of him when he thrust the match into the black train trailing across the deck. But even then his coolness and determination did not desert him. He pushed in the glowing end and waited till the grains commenced to splutter. Then he tossed the brand full at Roger, and setting the example to his men, leaped over the side, the Spaniards following instantly,

A Fleet of Brigantines

tumbling into the lake with a series of loud splashes, and with loud shouts to attract the attention of their comrades. As for the attackers, the Mexicans hardly realized what was happening, for they were unacquainted with the powers of gunpowder, and even then, after their conflicts with the Spaniards, did not know how the thunder of their guns was produced, nor the means by which the ball was driven. They stared over the side, therefore, while the crossbow-men sent their shafts at the swimmers. And there they would have remained, deafening the air with their shouts of triumph, had it not been for their leader. Roger bounded forward and leaped at the spluttering train, hoping to put out the fire with his foot. But it ran as swiftly as a man could travel, and as he reached the black and smoking line which it had left, he saw that it was already descending the rough ladder which led below, and was racing over the piece of canvas on which Alvarez had laid it. Beyond, in the darkness, which the flashes of the powder helped to lighten spasmodically, was the faint outline of a barrel.

"The powder! We are dead men if we do not leap overboard!" he shouted. Then he seized Teotlili and dragged him to the side.

"Tell all to leap at once for their lives," he said. "Come, Philip, Peter, and every one. We will capture Alvarez in the water."

There was not a moment to be lost, and therefore, without another glance at those aboard, he flung himself into the water, and swimming beneath the surface as far as possible, rose at length when he was forced to do so by the need of air. At the same instant there was a deafening explosion, the

Roger the Bold

brigantine split into fragments, while her deck and spars, together with some dozen of the unhappy natives, were flung into the air with terrific force, the *débris* descending within a few seconds, and splashing into the lake. Roger trod water and looked vainly for Alvarez. But he was nowhere to be seen. Then he turned to look for Peter and Philip, to find them close behind him.

"The enemy are being picked up by that brigantine," gasped Philip, pointing to one which was close at hand. "We had better move away, or they will take us prisoners."

"Or shoot us down with their shafts," spluttered Peter, who was no great swimmer. "Better get aboard one of the canoes."

"We must do so at once," answered Roger. "Alvarez must escape for the time, but I know that he is with the enemy now, and that he has the disc. Let him wait, for I will take him yet, and make him pay for his treachery. Ah, here is Teotlili."

"My lord, I have whistled for one of the larger craft. Let us get aboard and be gone. It would be well to signal to all to retire. The brigantines are too strong for us."

The Mexican noble trod water vigorously, and waved his arm. At the signal one of the larger craft dashed up at a brisk pace, for the sails had been hoisted again, and very soon she had taken the swimmers aboard. Then Roger had an opportunity of seeing how the battle went, and realized that Teotlili had spoken correctly. For the brigantines would have conquered even if they had had no armed men aboard, and merely sufficient to man the ropes and the tiller. The breeze had freshened,

A Fleet of Brigantines

and the surface of the lake was now driven into little waves, on which the canoes danced up and down. And through the water came the brigantines, handled by men who knew their work well. They came down upon the line of canoes, and plunged through and through them, upsetting them, crashing their timbers, and sending them to the bottom. Then they wheeled, and came back again, spreading shot and crossbow shafts amongst the swimmers and those on the canoes. Nothing could withstand them, and though Roger and his friends made another gallant attempt to board one of the enemy, they failed, a cannon-shot stripping their craft of its free-board, and causing it to sink. Once more he was thrown into the water, and with difficulty was picked up by another of the craft made up of several canoes.

“Better turn our faces to Mexico,” said Teotlili, who possessed wonderful vitality. “All is lost here, my lord, while there we can still fight. The ships are too strong for us.”

Roger reluctantly admitted the fact, and at once the shrill whistle, the signal for retreat, sounded across the lake. The canoes turned about, and men laboured at the oars to get away from the enemy. But the breeze that day was unfriendly to the Mexicans. It filled the sails of the brigantines, till the vessels heeled with the pressure, while they came through the water with a big foaming wave at their cutwaters. Their pace easily enabled them to come up with the flying canoes, and once again they ploughed through them, sinking them and killing or drowning the occupants. It was a disaster, and Roger was not to escape from it so easily. For Alvarez had never lost sight of him.

Roger the Bold

"That is the craft," he bellowed in the ear of the commander of the brigantine on which he had taken refuge. "There is their god of air, the Mexican cacique hailing from England. Follow the canoe, and you will win honour for all of us. Cortes will give you promotion and a special reward."

He raced to the bows and stood there staring out at Roger, shaking his fist at him, and aiming a musket at his figure as often as possible.

"We shall be overwhelmed before we can return to the city," said Teotlili, after a little while. "They sail so swiftly that even we cannot get away. I fear that all will perish."

"Then let us strike off this course and make for the northern shore," exclaimed Roger, standing to his full height and surveying the terrifying scene. "We have drifted close in there during the battle, and a half-hour's run will take us to the land. There we can desert the canoes and make overland to the city. Better that than see all perish."

It was, in fact, the only means of saving the occupants of the Mexican fleet, which had put out with such confidence from the city, and at a signal from Teotlili all turned their prows towards the shore. And now, for the very first time on this disastrous day, fortune smiled upon the Mexicans. For it happened that the shore on this northern side of the lake shelved very gradually—so much so that within a little while the fleet was fleeing over a portion of the lake where the water was very shallow. The brigantines came after them at their swiftest pace, till the foremost came to a gradual stop, and remained fixed in the mud. Then the others lay to, firing with their guns.

A Fleet of Brigantines

“Had all gone ashore we should have had them at our mercy,” said Roger, in tones of vexation. “But the attempt would be useless now. They can lie off within easy range, and we should lose heavily. Better make the best of our way home.”

“And comfort ourselves with the thought that we have made a brave attempt, and that we have aided in the destruction of one of the vessels,” answered Teotlili. “My lord must not be down-hearted. These men who have died on the lake to-day have done service to Mexico, for we cannot always win. We have opposed an enemy of whom we were afraid in former times, and we have shown our men that by using strategy we can capture vessels. May the opportunity not occur later for a second attack? Surely it will be possible, with the knowledge gained this day, to organize an attempt on another occasion. We can lay an ambush for the Spaniards on the water, and perhaps take all these brigantines. Let my lord consider that, and think of the future rather than of what has just happened.”

The noble laid his hand on Roger’s shoulder, for he saw that the latter was troubled and depressed at the defeat suffered by the fleet. And who can blame Roger for feeling so? The whole responsibility of the affair rested on his shoulders, and as he made for the shore he asked himself over and over again whether he had not been rash—mad, indeed—to make such an attempt.

“It might have succeeded,” he said at length. “Had the wind not risen we could have surrounded the fleet of brigantines, and they would have been overwhelmed. Yes, the attempt was justifiable, and

Roger the Bold

its non-success is no fault of ours. Circumstances were too strong for us. And, as Teotlili says, the knowledge we have gained will prove useful, for we will lay a trap for the enemy."

His mind at once became occupied with the thought, and so interested was he that he hardly noticed when the canoes reached the land.

"We are as close as we can get now," said Teotlili, touching him on the arm. "We had better wade ashore and run to the city, for their horsemen might attempt to cut us off. Hark! I hear sounds of fighting."

They stood up in the canoe and listened, the noise of some conflict coming to their ears.

"The first attack on the causeways," said Roger. "We need have no fear of the enemy breaking in while we are absent. But we had better run, for, as you say, the Spaniards might send out their horse to cut us off. Let the men keep together."

They stepped into the water, and waded across the mud-flats till they reached dry ground, the Mexicans dragging their canoes after them. Then all set their faces toward Mexico, where they arrived within half an hour. They found each of the three Spanish divisions hotly engaged on the causeways, and hastened at once to aid in the defence, the arrival of Roger being hailed with loud shouts of triumph.

"The cacique has come," the men bellowed to one another. "Here is the fighting chief who has promised to lead us. We will show these Spaniards what we can do."

Men rushed out and picked the young giant up in their arms. Then he was borne to the main

A Fleet of Brigantines

causeway, to where the King of Mexico was stationed.

"I am glad that you have come," said the latter, grasping his hand warmly. "I am lost without you. You know these men against whom we fight, and you are able to meet their strategy with methods which are new to us. Come to the edge of the breach and see what is happening."

They walked along the causeway to that part which faced the far shore, and was within a stone's throw of it. A wide breach had been made, on the near side of which the Mexican crossbow-men were posted, while on the far side stood the Spaniards, baulked for the moment, and viciously plying the defenders with a hail of shot and cannon-ball. The attack had commenced, in fact—an attack which was to develop, and which was to be of unparalleled ferocity.

CHAPTER XVIII

The Defence of the Causeways

THE siege of Mexico had commenced in earnest, for now that the fleet of canoes had been scattered or sent to the bottom, the brigantines closed in on the fair city which lay on the bosom of the lake, till the long, straight causeway stretching north and south prevented further progress. And there the cannon were turned upon the defenders who manned the wide strip of masonry, while from the farther side of the breach other cannon belched forth shot at them. But this was not all. At two other and separate points the Spaniards had made an incursion on to the causeways, all of which led to the city, so that three parties of Mexicans were kept engaged, and their whole force posted on the main portion of the viaduct was exposed to the flanking fire of the brigantines.

Cortes had shown again and again how astute he was. The reader will have gathered already that he was a man of unusual determination, tenacious of his purpose even to the verge of recklessness, for otherwise he would have retired long ago. Indeed, there is little doubt that had he not been there Mexico would have survived. And more than that. Had Cortes been in the full favour of those in

The Defence of the Causeways

authority in Cuba and in Spain, the need for some special effort would have been absent, and his determination to subjugate these people probably less. However, during the whole course of his operations before the city he showed unusual forethought, and conducted the siege in a masterly manner. Indeed, the conduct of this gallant Fernando Cortes from the very beginning marked him out as a commander of unusual power and distinction; for who else would have dared to defy the authorities, to capture those sent out to take the command from him, and suborn their followers, and finally to dictate formal letters to the Regent in Spain, as if he still held the royal command to lead this expedition?

And now that the task of subjugating the people of Mexico faced him he set about the work in a manner which showed the thoughtful, careful leader; for the reader will remember that he had arranged for the building of the brigantines months before, and had meanwhile spent his time and his powers in bringing other native tribes under the sway of Spain, and in gaining allies who would aid in the attack on Mexico. That attack had commenced. Mexico was face to face with a formidable fleet on the lake side, while three of her main causeways were occupied by the mixed forces under Cortes' command.

"They fight fiercely and as if they were certain of defeating us," said the king, as Roger came to his side, and the two stood watching the combatants. "These Spaniards have sent their shot across the gap continually, and our men are struck down. Meanwhile the enemy fill up the gap so that they may cross."

Roger the Bold

"This is their first day at the work," answered our hero, "and therefore the attackers are fresh and eager. But we will alter that. As for the cannon-shot, the men must be told to build their barricade higher."

A few words from the king set the natives at work, and very soon such a pile of bricks and *débris* was thrown at the edge of the gap that the Spanish shot buried themselves in the wall without doing harm. At the same time their crossbow-men and their musketeers kept up a scathing fire to which the Mexicans made reply.

"They will succeed in filling up the gap," said Roger, after he had watched for a little while, "and we must fall back. But we have a dozen more of the gaps to defend before we come to the city, and shall hope to tire them out. Look! There come the brigantines. We shall have to beat a retreat very soon."

He pointed out into the lake, and there came the brigantines, sailing in toward the city proudly, as if conscious of their victory. They brought to within a long bow-shot, and before coming to the piles which the Mexicans had taken the trouble to drive in all directions close to the causeway, thus showing that their spies had obtained information for them. Then their guns opened, and a murderous discharge belched forth at the defenders of the causeway. The shot crashed against the masonry, or tore lanes through the unfortunate natives, killing and maiming huge numbers. At the same moment the guns on the far side of the gap opened upon the barricade, demolishing the upper parts.

"We must retire at once," said Roger. "We

The Defence of the Causeways

will recall the men to the next wall and make better preparations. Come, let us be going. To remain is to throw our lives away."

There was a shrill whistle, and the natives began to retire, crossing the next gap by means of planks left for that purpose. Then they set to work to raise their barricade with bricks, women and children bringing the latter, while an attempt was made to obtain cover on the lake side.

"We must do something to drive off the brigantines," said Roger, as he stood watching the men at work, and listened to the loud crashes in the distance, the sounds made by the attackers as they filled in the gap. "Come, Philip, or you Peter Tamworth, have you nothing to suggest? How can we keep them at a safer distance? They take us in flank with their fire, and while their ammunition lasts we are helpless. We must drive them off or relinquish the causeway."

This, in fact, was obvious to all, for the brigantines had matters in their own hands. There was nothing to keep them from the outer face of the causeway save the piles which had been driven there, and those could only be placed in the shallower parts, for long timber was not obtainable. Consequently the ships which the crafty Cortes had caused to be built could sail along the causeway ahead of his troops who were attacking it, and could take the Mexicans in flank and in rear. No one could stand there against their shot. No wonder that the king of Mexico and Teotlili looked at Roger in dismay, and that the latter stood to his full height, looking back along the causeway with a frown on his sunburned face.

Roger the Bold

"If they were in the ocean——" commenced Peter, shuffling from one leg to the other, for the presence of royalty always unsettled him; and he was beginning to have a huge respect for Roger.

"The brigantines, you mean? But they are here, in the lake. What then?"

"If they were at sea, I should try a plan to turn them out," said Peter, somewhat abashed. "They would fly if there was fire, and, master Roger, there might be fire here. We could float a canoe, one of the big ones, down upon them, and that would send them running."

"And they are close enough to be taken before they could get clear," burst in Philip. "In the confusion some might become entangled, and then——"

"We would send our canoes against them," exclaimed Roger. "'Tis a grand idea, and we will see what can be done. I will speak to Teotlili."

"We have resin here in abundance," said the latter, when the question was put to him, "and there are other inflammable matters. The plan may well be tried, and may succeed at first. But they will not be caught twice. Later on the houses will protect us."

He went off at once to make arrangements, and his men worked with such energy that when the Spaniards had contrived to fill in the far gap, and were preparing to advance again, a couple of craft composed of three canoes lashed together, lay in recesses beneath the causeway, their boards piled high with resin and other matters.

"And now comes the question of who is to take command," said Roger. "These natives are so

The Defence of the Causeways

terrified at the sound of the cannon that they will hardly fill the post. I will gladly take one canoe."

"And I a second," burst in Philip. "But you should not go, Roger, if you will forgive my saying so. You are the commander here. The king and all look to you, and already you have had one narrow escape. You are too valuable to the defence, and should protect your life as long as possible. I will go for one."

"And by your leave I will sail the second," exclaimed Peter, all aglow at the prospect. "There is little to do. We must push out, and pole along gently. Then, as we get to close quarters, we will fire the mass and leap overboard."

"Then it shall be arranged as you say. I will stay behind and will lead the attack. It is already getting dusk, and perhaps, if we delay a little, you will be able to get out to the brigantines without being seen. If that is the case we may do them some damage. I will have men armed with the crossbow in canoes, ready to take advantage of the confusion. Go to your places and prepare. I will send to you when the moment comes."

He dismissed them with a nod, and went to the barricade erected on the causeway. Like that at the last gap, it consisted of sun-dried bricks, and was so thick that it offered an effective resistance to the cannon-shot of the enemy. On its landward side there was a gaping chasm where the causeway had been entirely removed, and this the enemy now proceeded to fill, just as they had done in the case of the other one. Thanks to the huge amount of native labour which their allies provided, there was no difficulty about the matter, and for material there

Roger the Bold

was the stone and bricks from the houses and forts built at the extreme land end of the viaduct. Already the Spanish allies had levelled these, and now they came in their thousands, each carrying a boulder, a beam, or some dozen bricks, which they threw into the gap. While they worked, the soldiers kept up a furious fire against the barricade beyond, while their crossbow-men sent shafts humming through the air. Then the brigantines hove up the stone anchors which each had cast, and poling higher up, dropped anchor in a position which gave them a clear and close range.

“Let the crossbow-men alone stand behind the barricade and pick off the enemy and hamper the work of filling in the ditch,” cried Roger, calling Teotlili’s attention. “The others are to throw themselves on their faces, and in that way they will escape the shot from the brigantines.”

The warning came none too soon, for hardly had he spoken, and the natives obeyed the command of the noble, than the ships opened fire, and a hail of small shot and cannon-balls struck the side of the causeway and plunged over it. Some struck the protection of bricks thrown up on that side, and dashed the bricks over on to the defenders. But none were seriously hurt, while all escaped the bullets. A shout of derision arose, the Mexicans whistling and screaming aloud with delight.

“’Tis the first time that they have escaped so easily,” said Teotlili. “My lord is full of methods to circumvent the enemy. A little while ago we stood bunched close together and waited death. These cruel guns slew us by tens and twenties, and cut deep lines in our ranks. We were robbed

The Defence of the Causeways

of our strength, and could not move hand or foot to escape; but now we are learning. It is possible to avoid death, and to save our lives for better work. Ah! the crash of the explosion is stunning. Even now I start and feel that I must fall."

"After all there is little more than the noise to alarm one," said Roger with a smile, showing wonderful coolness, which did not escape the Mexican noble. "Of course a ball might come and kill one while one crouched; but the wall makes their aim difficult, while those in front can do nothing. That was close, Teotlili. A little to the right and it would have mattered little to you or to me how the siege went."

"It would always matter," was the stern answer. "Even were I killed I think that I should still trouble. I could never sleep the long sleep knowing that these strange men were killing and hunting my countrymen. The place and the people are dear to me, my lord. I live for them only."

"And you would die for them cheerfully?" asked Roger.

"Surely I would. I would gladly suffer death on the swords of these men so that my king might escape. But listen, Roger. Should it happen that our king is slain, you will take the post? Promise me that? All are willing that you should succeed him, for without a leader we should be easily defeated. Promise me?"

The noble turned to Roger and looked him eagerly in the face, while Roger watched the brigantines. He their king! He, a simple cross-bow-man but a few weeks ago, to be asked to accept such a post! It was beyond belief! Then

Roger the Bold

he reflected on the faith which these simple people had in him, and thought of the times.

"I will act as king till the siege is raised, or till we are defeated," he answered; "that is, if the present king be killed, which God forbid. Till then I will remain as your cacique, and will lead the fighting men. But we must look to the defence. It gets dusk. A little while and our fire canoes may be of service."

He crept to the barricade, and looked across at the Spaniards. They were still maintaining a fierce fire with their guns, though they had withdrawn the weapons to a safer distance; for the crossbow-men on the Mexican side had already made a vast impression, and had taught the enemy the advisability of using discretion. As for their own musketeers and crossbow-men, they had retired altogether. Only the native allies came within range, carrying their burdens, and amongst their ranks the Mexican shafts created havoc.

"But we do not stop them," reflected Roger; "there are so many of them that the death of a few hundred seems not to matter. The gap will soon be filled; by then it will be dusk."

He waited eagerly, noting that the gap was now practically bridged across, though there still remained a strip close under the barricade which the allies had not yet reached.

"Have planks ready at hand," he said, suddenly turning to Teotlili, who was ever at his elbow. "Ah, Tamba, take charge of one and be ready. When I give the signal, leap the barricade and place the beam in position. Then let all the spear-men and those who have swords follow me. We will teach these invaders a lesson."

The Defence of the Causeways

It was anxious work waiting there, with the guns of the brigantine playing on the causeway, and their shot swishing overhead. But Roger would not be hurried. The ditch on the far side was not yet filled, and it was still too light. Ten minutes would make a difference, he told himself, and though his inclination was to shout now without further delay, and throw his men on the enemy, he held back, showing thereby the qualities possessed by few leaders. He waited till the time had actually arrived. Then his messenger flew to Philip and to Peter, and very soon two dark objects, each propelled by a couple of long poles wielded by the Englishmen and by a single native helper, emerged from the causeway from one of the numerous archways, and went swiftly towards the brigantines. At first their sudden presence caused no comment from the enemy; for all through the contest canoes had darted from the recesses, and efforts had been made, sometimes with success, to pull down the native allies from the farther side of the gap with the hooks which were attached to poles. It was therefore not until the larger craft had shot out from the causeway and moved some little way towards the brigantines that the attention of the Spaniards was attracted to them. Then there was a shout.

"Some of the natives seeking death," shouted one of the captains, derisively. "Leave them to the muskets or to our pikes; or better, heave a stone into them as they come alongside."

"What if they are dangerous? I've seen and had to fly from simpler craft before," answered an old seaman, with a growl. "What if they're filled

Roger the Bold

with things that will take fire? What if these craft are fire-craft sent to destroy us?"

The suggestion caused the captain to open his mouth, and he went along the deck, at a run to where the gunners stood.

"Train your pieces on them," he shouted in his excitement. "They are fire-ships, and we shall be burned. Stop them with a shot. Come! Move aside and let me take the task in hand."

They threw themselves on the cannon, while the alarm spread to the other vessels. Meanwhile Philip and Peter poled for their lives, sending the craft swiftly across the water. And as they poled Roger and the defenders watched them eagerly.

"They have not yet noticed the commotion on the far side of the gap," he said to Teotlili. "But they will see that there is something wrong soon, and then——"

"They see now, my lord. Listen to their shouts. And they are turning their guns away from us to the canoes. Will they hit them?"

"More likely to strike friend than foe," was the reassuring answer. "Ah! That shot would have sunk a single canoe with the wash it caused. Philip is lighting up."

It was still sufficiently light to enable those on the causeway to see what was passing, and Roger distinctly noticed Philip stand erect, and lift his pole into the canoe. Then there was a glow from the smouldering match he carried, followed by a burst of smoke, and then by a leaping flame which seemed to spread all over the craft. No! Not all over, for there was Philip at the stern, surrounded by flame, it seemed, and still poling towards the

The Defence of the Causeways

enemy. As for Peter, a shot fired from the nearest brigantine had struck the water within a foot of him, and as Roger had said, had well-nigh swamped his frail boat. However, he was unhurt, and following Philip's example, struck his match and then poled the flaming craft towards the brigantines. Fierce shouts resounded on every side, while aboard the brigantines there was the utmost confusion. Men raced up and down the decks, while the crews were called to the anchors. Some endeavoured to handle the pieces. But none were fashioned to be rapidly depressed, and so it happened that not a single shot struck the fire-craft. Nor did those who held the muskets help in the matter, for they too were taken with a panic. They threw down their weapons and helped at the anchor, or seized the long poles and endeavoured to push the vessel away into the lake.

Thud! The canoe in which stood Philip struck the side of the nearest brigantine, and Roger saw the young Englishman coolly grapple the rail with the hook with which his pole was armed. Then he beckoned to the native, and handing him the pole, drew his sword. In another moment he had sprung aboard, and the last that Roger saw of him he was slashing furiously at the enemy, while the native, clinging to the fire-craft till he was scorched, kept it close to the enemy's vessel till it had caught fire. Then he called loudly to Philip, and waiting till the latter had leaped into the water, disappeared in the same himself. Peter had equal luck, and showed the same pluck and determination. Indeed, within five minutes two of the brigantines were in flames from end to end, for they were constructed of a highly inflammable wood, while their

Roger the Bold

crews were plunging overboard in frantic alarm. As for the others, they cut away from their anchorage and poled into deep water, their crews aghast at the boldness and the success of the Mexicans. On the far side of the gap the Spaniards could hardly believe their eyes. They stared at the blazing vessels, forgetting their own particular portion of the conflict. It was an opportunity, and Roger seized upon it.

"The plank, Tamba," he shouted. "Now follow, every one, and sweep them from the causeway."

He leaped upon the top of the barricade, his tall figure standing out finely against the glare of the blazing vessels. Then, as Tamba placed the plank in position, he ran across it, and threw himself alone upon the Spaniards.

"Ah! A sortie! The dog of an English giant!" shouted their leader, who happened to be nearest. "Rally men! To the gap! Hold the causeway!"

His sword leaped to the front, and he made a thrust at Roger, which might well have transfixed him. But Roger had not experienced all this fighting for nothing. He put the thrust aside with a swift movement, and returned the blow with a terrific cut which fell full upon the Spaniard's helmet. There was the noise of rending steel, the Spaniard gasped and let his sword fall with a clatter. Then he pitched forward on to the causeway, and happening to tumble into a portion of the gap which had been only partially filled, and which sloped steeply, he slid, an inert mass, down the slope, and disappeared in the lake.

"Rally! Rally! Men of Mexico. Your leader

The Defence of the Causeways

is here. Forward, and drive the enemy! Forward, till we reach their camp!"

It was Teotlili who took up the shout, and voiced it to the pitch of his lungs. Not that the Mexicans needed encouragement, for their excitement was great, and their spirits raised to the utmost pitch by the success of the fire-ships. They shouted lustily, and then, to the accompaniment of shouts and shrill whistles came over the barricade like a swarm of bees, and hurled themselves against the Spaniards. And now numbers and the suddenness of the sortie told in their favour; for whereas formerly those armed with the native sword had been practically helpless in the face of the Spanish swordsmen, now the rush carried all before the Mexicans. The Spaniards broke and fled, Roger and his men in hot pursuit.

"To their camp! To their camp!" he shouted. Then seeing Teotlili, he urged his way toward him, the Mexicans making a path at once.

"The guns and the ammunition," he said. "Tell off men to take them into the city. They will be useful. We must have them."

He went on at a run till he and his men were in the camp, which had been formed close to the edge of the causeway. But here the enemy rallied, while a strong force came to their aid. It was time to retire, and Roger whistled. Then he waved his arm.

"Back to the barricade," he shouted. "Run! Run!"

The retirement was carried out swiftly, so swiftly, in fact, that the Spaniards were dumfounded. They were preparing to hold their camp and administer

Roger the Bold

punishment, when suddenly the attackers disappeared as quickly as they had come, carrying with them two cannon and a small supply of ammunition.

"'Tis the English dog's leading," said Cortes, with a growl, as he looked out at the lake and watched the blazing vessels. "Well is it for us that I had a fleet constructed. This man must be slain. Would that I had hanged him that very night instead of keeping him till the morrow. And that led to the freedom of all his friends. They say these Englishmen are dogged fighters, who battle with their heads as well as with their arms. We shall see, we shall see. But if I catch them——!"

No doubt he would have hanged them at once, and there was much cause for his vexation. Indeed, when the tale of the sortie was completed, and his losses known, the leader of the invaders ground his teeth with anger.

"But it will not occur again," he said to himself. "There will be no more fire-ships, and no more sorties. I will double the guards, while the brigantines will never anchor. Thus they will be able to slip away on the instant."

Roger and the Mexicans had indeed retrieved their defeat of the morning, and had caused great loss to the enemy; for they had destroyed three of the brigantines, and had killed many of the Spanish soldiers and sailors, a loss which Fernando Cortes could not easily replace. But it could not always be so, as they discovered in the course of the next few weeks; for the besiegers attacked in three separate parties every day, and the causeways rang with the sound of strife. Gaps which had been diligently

The Defence of the Causeways

constructed were filled in one by one, while, finding that the enemy repaired their losses and remade the gaps during the night, there being ample labour, Cortes caused his men to camp on the ground they had won, till that portion of the causeways which had fallen to the three parties presented a curious scene. Tiny huts were constructed along them, where the enemy lived.

By now another enemy was attacking the besieged. Starvation stared them in the face, for the brigantines prevented a fresh supply of provisions from being brought to the city. The water in the tanks was very low, and pestilence, the accompaniment of every siege and every campaign, stalked through the city. Men and women and children died by the score, till there were none to bury them. But still the gallant resistance was continued.

“Not till the city is in ruins and the last man slain shall we give way,” said Teotlili. “In these matters the priests rule the king, and that is their decision. If it were not so, I should say the same. What sort of life awaits us if we are beaten and live? Slavery, and torture. Yes, Tamba has told me the tale of Cuba, and that is what will happen here. These foolish native allies who have gone over to the Spaniards are but helping in their own ruin, for they, too, will be trampled underfoot. They will be hewers of wood and drawers of water to these men who attack us. We will die at our posts. That is our last word.”

The decision was, in fact, adhered to firmly, though, as the siege closed in and want and pestilence did its work, Cortes endeavoured time and again to alter it, and to induce the Mexicans to

Roger the Bold

capitulate. Nothing but defeat of the last man would end the struggle, and therefore he set his parties to their task again. A huge effort was made to complete the junction of the three divisions, and we shall see how Cortes fared, and how the Mexicans struggled to prevent the junction.

CHAPTER XIX

Alvarez probes the Secret

IT was early morning, and a brilliant sun threw slanting rays across the dancing waters of the great lake and across the picturesque buildings of the fairy-like city of Mexico. From the summits of a hundred sacrificial towers rose the smoke of the eternal fires, while the figures of the hateful priests stood out prominently. It was the dawn of a day likely to be momentous in the history of Spain and of Mexico; for Cortes was about to make his biggest attempt to conquer. Difficulties and danger but drew him on to further exertions, and increased opposition but whetted his appetite for conquest. This day must see the junction of his two divisions, for the troops under Cristoval de Olid had already joined with the force under Sandoval, and both occupied the camp of the causeway, the causeway leading directly north for more than a league into the heart of the city.

The reader has read of the fighting there, and a few words will relate the fortunes of that other division which had set out from Tlacuba, under the command of Alvarado. Like the others, it had advanced for more than a league, filling gaps continuously, and camping on the ground which it had won,

Roger the Bold

for the simple reason that a night saw all its work repaired by the Mexicans. It had advanced, and, like the men under Cortes, it had met with disaster on one occasion; for the Mexicans, instructed by their English cacique, had laid an ambush for them, had lured them on, and then had surrounded them, capturing a few of the Spaniards alive, whom they had ruthlessly sacrificed, though Roger did his utmost to prevent the act. But they had not reached the market square yet, and had not come into touch with their comrades.

As for the brigantines, they had learned to be wary, and their commanders had gradually driven the canoes from the lake, had found huge water streets capable of containing them, and had in this manner reached both sides of the causeways, and the interior of some parts of the city. Everything, therefore, was ripe for a junction, and the king of Mexico, with Roger, Teotlili, and a score of his nobles and caciques, stood on the summit of the huge tower dedicated to the god of war, and looked out on this early morning awaiting the long-expected attack.

"Who would think that there was war?" said Roger, as he stepped to the very edge of the giddy height, just as he had done on that eventful morning when he and Tamba were alone with Teotlili, wondering whether it was to be peace or the reverse. "The city is unharmed, and nothing speaks of war save the broken causeways and the camps of the enemy. A pity it is that men cannot live in peace."

"A pity indeed," answered Teotlili, gloomily. "The morning is fair, and the city never looked better. But go into the houses and into the streets

Alvarez probes the Secret

and there you will see much that speaks of war. Our people die by the hundred, and their bodies lie unburied. It is war, friend Roger, and this day will see a more bitter struggle than has hitherto taken place. Our spies have given us certain information. I trust that we are prepared. There is nothing that we have not discussed?"

"Nothing. We have talked through the night, and now the orders have been sent to the people. We must hope for success. Look now at the camps. There is a stir there. The Spaniards are moving."

"And there are the horses. The men are mounting. The attack will commence before the hour is gone. See, my lord, those at Tlacuba are prepared also."

From the elevation of this gigantic temple it was possible to see every corner of the city and of the surrounding lake, and there spread out below in the sunlight were the armies of the invaders, thousands upon thousands of native allies, and the handful of truly gallant and steadfast Spaniards who formed but a tiny nucleus. And they were moving forward. Mass had been attended with due reverence, and the two forces were advancing to the attack, hoping to unite in the market square. In the city every house was occupied. Thousands of bowmen and men armed with the new and more effective weapon introduced by Roger lay concealed on the terraces, in the gardens, and in every possible nook. The summit of every tower was crowded, bricks and stones were held in readiness to be hurled down on the attackers, while in the streets were thousands, all with complete instructions.

"Their boldness shall be their undoing," said

Roger the Bold

the king. "We will follow the advice of Roger the cacique to the very letter, and this morn shall see a turn in the tide of our fortunes. Let all who have commands now go to them."

There was solemn leave-taking, and then Roger and his friends parted. An hour later the clash of arms was heard, while the city rang with the thunder of cannon and with the crash of musketry. The Spaniards forced their way along the causeways, while the brigantines poled along the canals, firing into the flanks. Then Cortes himself advanced, and divided his men into three parties.

"To the market square," he said, "and see that none penetrates beyond a gap till it is filled. Now forward, in the name of Our Lady."

At the command Spaniards and allies pressed on into the city, fighting every step of the way. Bolts were rained upon them from the houses, and every building meant an attack, a fierce resistance, and then victory. That accomplished, the next house called for the same efforts, while the native allies who followed destroyed the building just captured, levelling it to the ground. And so for many hours the conflict continued, the Mexicans resisting fiercely, and yet giving way steadily as if by pre-conceived design, while on the summit of the tower stood their king, his eyes on them, watching how they carried out his orders.

"We have them in our hands," he suddenly cried, with a shout of joy. "Look, all, and see the gap which has been passed. It has not been filled. Our people retire hastily, and lure the enemy on. They hear the shouts and the cannon of their friends, and they long to reach the market square

Alvarez probes the Secret

first. They are rushing forward in the excitement, and they are neglecting to fill the breaches. In a little while we will turn. But let them advance farther in. Let the city close about them, and then——!”

He became almost inarticulate, so great was his enthusiasm. He leaned over the edge of the tower, watching the conflict as if his life depended upon it. And every second some ejaculation escaped his lips. His feet fidgeted. He would have rushed below had that been possible.

“My lord distresses himself,” said one of the priests, advancing to his side, and displaying the red robes of the chief of his profession. “This day will go well for us. That is the answer of the war god. The English cacique, whom we once almost sacrificed, will be the saviour of our city and of the nation. See him there. He fights as one who values his life less than the honour of victory.”

“He is a noble youth and a great leader,” was the answer, “and his reward shall be great. Listen, and mark my words. This giant who came so strangely amongst us will stand by us to the end—if the end should unhappily come.”

“He will die if need be,” was the answer.

“And if resistance becomes no longer possible he will fly.”

“That is due to him,” replied the priest. “He is not of our blood. He came as a prisoner, and we treated him harshly. He has shown devotion to us, and if our cause be lost it will be right that he and his comrades should fly. They have homes of their own, no doubt. They have a right to return to them.”

Roger the Bold

“And we owe them all. This Roger the cacique is the heart of the defence. His reward should be certain. Cannot you find this treasure and hand it to him now, so that it may be safe in his keeping?”

“Impossible,” was the short answer. “He deserves all and more than we possess, that I acknowledge freely. But I cannot disclose its whereabouts till the disc comes to my hand. Would that I had never made the error of sending it away. But the mistake was made, and nothing but the return of the disc can set the matter right. With that before me I can read the secret, and hand this reward to the cacique. If it does not come, he must fly, rich in the memory of the gallantry he has shown.”

It was useless to argue further, and the king, who, like his predecessors, was completely in the hands of the priesthood, was compelled to be satisfied with the assurance he had received. If the disc was discovered, then this Roger de Luce, for whom he had conceived a great affection, would receive reward, would have his pick of gold and gems which, to a Mexican, were of little or no value, but which to these white men were better than life itself, else why should the Spaniards fight so fiercely for their possession, sacrificing thereby so many thousands of innocent people, and bringing misery into so many homes?

But it was no time for soliloquizing, for down in the streets below the turmoil of the battle rose even louder. Flushed with their success the enemy were pushing forward, and were now within a little way of the rendezvous, where the two forces were to meet. They could hear one another's cannon, and

Alvarez probes the Secret

even their comrades' shouts. They were spurred to even greater efforts, and forgetting the caution which their leader had impressed upon them they raced on, forgetful of the chasms left gaping behind, of the thousands of Mexicans concealed beneath the streets and in the side canals, forgetful of all save the mad desire to conquer, to end the siege, to reach this market square, than which there was none so fine in the whole of Spain, or even in Europe, and reach the goal before their comrades. It was a race, and a costly one it proved.

"The time has come. The cage door should be shut," said the king of Mexico, solemnly. "There is Roger the cacique. I see him plainly, and he waves to me. I will sound the signal which will set the dogs loose on them, and will drive them from the city."

He raised a huge horn to his lips and took in a deep breath. Then he sounded a long, deep, mournful note, which penetrated to every corner. Once more he sent it floating across the city. Then he threw the horn down, and raced to the streets below; for this king was a gallant young fellow, kind and gentle when not roused, but a plucky fighter, possessed of unusual courage.

What a change there was! The sound of the horn had roused the Mexicans to a frenzy, for it was a well-known signal, and signified some special danger threatening their king, and the people of this city, one and all, would gladly have died in his behalf. But on this particular day it meant more. It meant that a well-thought-out plan was to be accomplished. That this retreat, so carefully managed, was, after all, but a part of the plan, and that

Roger the Bold

now that its purpose was accomplished, and the enemy lured into the city, the time had come to turn upon them. Never before had the Spaniards heard such demoniacal shouts, such whistling, and such terrible calls. The air was filled with them, while from every side swarmed Mexicans, who rushed in upon the swords, eager to die, eager to give their lives if only they could strike one blow for king and city. But their rush was organized. A leader sprang before each party. Every street had its force and its commander, while in the very centre the gigantic figure of the white cacique of Roger the Bold led the lines of fighters, hurled himself with resistless valour into the ranks of the enemy, and bore them back alone. No wonder that the Mexicans went mad, that the Spaniards quailed, and rushed back towards their camp, and that the fatal gap, which had not been filled by one of the parties, proved a death-trap to the men. Even Cortes was well-nigh taken, while huge numbers of allies and Spaniards were killed. Indeed, quite sixty of the invaders fell captive or died—a serious loss to Cortes.

Never before had the enemy received such treatment. They had seen fighting in other parts, and had met the natives of Cuba. But that was child's play to these Mexican fights, where men swarmed out in their thousands, and with the help of their English allies fell upon them. Even their arms had improved during the siege. Numbers carried the crossbow, while spearmen in serried ranks bore down upon the horsemen and the soldiers armed with sword and buckler. And if that were not enough to cause defeat, the canoes which the commanders of the brigantines imagined that they had

Alvarez probes the Secret

driven from the lake appeared from a thousand hiding-places, and advancing along the sides of the causeways, galled the retreating armies with their shafts, and dragged men into the water with their long poles and hooks. Could the tale of that eventful day be told, it would include a hundred and more dread single combats fought in the water, would describe how Spaniards, loaded with their armour, fell gasping with their exertions down the slope of the causeway, hooked from their feet by the poles, and then were seized by a dozen frenzied individuals, who threw themselves in a body upon each one, bearing him to the bed of the lake, and holding the unhappy wretch there till he was drowned. But there was worse to follow. The enemy had hardly reached their camp, and crept behind their defences there, when the bulk of the population returned to the city, and there commenced a scene of unparalleled ferocity. They dragged their captives to the huge tower dedicated to the god of war, and drove them to the summit with kicks and buffets. Then they decked them in feathers, and by main force caused them to dance before the idol, and in the sight of their miserable comrades in the camps below. After that came the gruesome sacrifice—a sacrifice which no efforts of Roger could put a stop to.

“They are clean out of hand, these Mexicans,” he said with a groan to Philip, as they sat in their quarters below. “I can do nothing with them now, for they are mad. Their superstition is stronger than any belief that they have in me, and these priests control them. It is hateful to think that the wretched prisoners are being sacrificed.”

Roger the Bold

"It makes the blood run cold," agreed Philip, with a shudder. "The death is a cruel one, and you should know something of the agonies endured by these unhappy prisoners. But let it be a warning to Cortes. He came here of his own free will. He and his men have attacked people who were disposed to be friendly, and this is their reward. They came hoping for gold and treasure, and with the wish to stop these human sacrifices. What have they accomplished? Their gold caused the death of numbers in that first retreat, and now, through their persistence, more victims are offered up, while thousands are dying deaths which are far worse and far more miserable than is that suffered on the altar. Pah! Though I hate sacrifice, and know that these enemies long to stop it, I know also that they are hypocrites, that they would sacrifice you and me and all of us this very day if we were captured. We should swing at the end of the causeway."

There was a grunt of assent from Peter Tamworth, while Roger was bound to agree. After all, he thought, what were the lives of the few who had been sacrificed since the coming of Cortes, compared with the lives, the happiness of the thousands perishing in Mexico.

"The fight will wane," he said, "but the net will not be opened; it will close in more tightly, until the end comes. Cortes will never give way."

Nor did our hero prove wrong in this surmise, for for many days the siege languished. Fighting still continued, but it was half-hearted. Meanwhile the huge success attained by the Mexicans brought numbers of vacillating adherents to their side, while thousands of the native allies left the army gathered

Alvarez probes the Secret

under the banner of Castile. It was a turn in the fortunes of Fernando Cortes, and many another leader would have given way. But this redoubtable general was a diplomatist and a sagacious tactician as well. He rallied the natives to his banner again, and then once more pushed on with the attack. When seventy-four days had passed Fernando Cortes was in possession of more than seven-eighths of the city. In the remaining portion were gathered the survivors of the gallant defence.

Tall and gaunt, looking more like a slim ghost than the Roger of this story, our hero waited for the end, determined to see the siege to its bitter point. For days he had eaten nothing but a few herbs gathered from odd crevices by the faithful Tamba, while a fish sometimes added to his repast. Ten of his comrades were dead. The remainder were skeletons, too weak almost to walk, only able to fight when pressed by dire necessity. All were parched with thirst. As for the people of the unfortunate city, they had died literally in their tens of thousands. The streets were filled by their unburied bodies; they lay in the courtyards, in the temple squares, and in their houses, piled thickly together. Those who survived walked listlessly here and there, or squatted on the ground, too weak to move. They waited for the very last—for the coming of the Spaniards and of their allies.

“Nothing can save them,” said Roger, huskily. “These native allies slaughter the poor people like sheep, and they are so weak that they make no resistance. It is terrible! Would that the priests would allow the king to surrender. But they will

Roger the Bold

not do that. We shall fight to the bitter end, and then there are canoes to take us away. Remember and warn all our comrades. When the horn sounds they are to rush to the stage at the back of the palace, and there embark. We have the Spanish guns there, and just sufficient ammunition for one discharge ; perhaps we shall succeed in getting off. Now let us go to our positions. This, surely, must be the last day of all."

An hour later the Spaniards swarmed into the city, and a desperate encounter commenced, the native allies bursting into the houses and killing those who were helpless. Others who still had strength and determination to fight retreated to the palace, showing a firm face to the enemy. But even they at length became demoralized, and soon the scene was one of confusion. Natives hunted for Mexicans on every side. Friends and enemies were mixed together, when Roger and his party, all separated by now, made the best of their way towards the landing-stage. Suddenly our hero gave expression to a startled cry.

"Alvarez!" he exclaimed in a whisper. "The traitor, and by himself! He is seeking for some one and—ah, there is the priest! The artful rogue has made him captive."

He crouched in the hollow existing between two of the buildings, and stared out at the intruders. And thanks to his quickness he escaped observation, the Spaniard passing some yards away, while following him were five of the native allies, in whose charge walked the chief priest, his red robe in tatters. They passed in through the palace gate, and were lost to view.

Alvarez probes the Secret

"Gone in search of treasure," thought Roger. "Shall I follow, or make for the stage?"

He hesitated, fearing that if he were to delay the canoes might leave without him. He listened to the distant shouts and to the cries of the combatants, for on every side small parties of famished Mexicans were offering a last resistance to the enemy. Then he sprang to his feet and ran after the Spaniard.

"No," he thought; "I have come so far, and have put up with so much, that I will not sacrifice all at the last for fear of being left behind. I will follow, and perhaps I may be successful. I wish that Phil or Peter, or even Tamba, were here to give me their help."

Darting across the street he passed through the gate and traversed a courtyard. At the exit he paused and suddenly crouched to the ground. Then he crawled forward on hands and knees, and gained some shrubs in the garden. Alvarez was again in sight, and the priest and his captors led the advance.

"This is the garden," Alvarez was saying. "Now, dog with the red robe, you who have slain so many of my comrades, lead the way to the treasure. Here is the disc. Lead swiftly, for I would have none else see me."

He looked round furtively, fearful that his comrades should discover his deceit and wrest the treasure from him. Then he stalked to the side of the priest, tore the disc from the very same leather pouch in which Roger had kept it, and thrust it in front of his face.

"Come," he said, with an oath, looking about him with frightened eyes. "Move! Let your wits work

Roger the Bold

swiftly. This holds the secret. Fernando Cortes knew that, and you also. I have learned that you are the only man who can read that secret. Read, then, and quickly, or I will treat you as you have served those others."

He showed his teeth, while the hand which held the disc shook, so great was his anxiety. As for the priest, he had no alternative. A dagger was in the Spaniard's other hand, while the natives who held him looked as though they would slaughter him with glee. He trembled, for this man who had killed so many wretched victims feared to die himself. He trembled, stretched out his hand for the disc, and then suddenly hesitated. Courage came to him in this terrible position, and he realized that if he showed the whereabouts of the treasure, he would be slaughtered as surely as if he refused. And these Spaniards lived and fought for gold and jewels. If he refused, then they would have gained nothing but their conquest of the city, and besides—"It was promised to the gallant white chief who led us and gave us his counsel," he thought. "It belongs to him, and if he cannot take it away, then it shall lie hidden where it is now. No; I will die now. Let this wretch slay me, and have done."

He was in the very act of flinging the disc to one side when his eye happened to roam across the garden, amongst its trampled bushes and shrubs, once so neat and so brilliant with blooms, and now almost bare of leaves, for the reason that the starving people had plucked and eaten them. He started and raised his head. Then his eye flashed a message, and he stared at the disc once more. For he had

Alvarez probes the Secret

seen Roger. The figure of the giant cacique had appeared as he crawled from one bush to another, and this head priest, in his hideous tattered robe of red, who had once so nearly killed Roger, determined to befriend him.

"Let justice be done," he said to himself. "For me there is no life. I feared death a moment ago, though I have nothing to live for. But my lord the noble white man has much before him. He is bold. He has given strength, wisdom, and almost life itself for our cause, and it is but just that we should give him the promised reward. He shall have it. While I can I will read the secret and will show the treasure, leaving him to deal with these rogues. Give me the disc," he said aloud. "The place is near at hand, that I know, but where I cannot say till I have read the picture."

For a little while he stared at the disc, tracing the lines of the causeways with his finger. What he saw there that Roger and others had failed to detect it would be impossible to state, but suddenly he gave a cry, while Alvarez gave vent to an exclamation of pleasure.

"He reads the secret," he said hoarsely, his eyes almost starting from his head, so great was his eagerness. "Come, now, sir priest, hasten, or these other birds of prey will be down upon me. Show me the wealth, for I wish to secure it for myself alone."

One of the natives who acted as guard to the priest rapidly interpreted, Alvarez taking the priest by his robe in his anxiety to hurry him on to the treasure.

"They are getting closer," he cried. "Listen to

Roger the Bold

their shouts. They will be here, if you are not speedy. Where is the hoard?"

His anxiety to be moving was pitiful. He trembled, stared about him as if he were hunted, and stamped with impatience. Then to his huge delight the priest moved.

"I have read the secret," he said. "The disc tells where the treasure is deposited. 'Tis close at hand. Follow, and I will take you to it."

He cast a significant glance at the spot where Roger had last been seen, and smiled grimly in his beard as he noted that the white cacique had come even closer. Then he turned on his heel and swept on through the garden.

"Follow!" he called out. "To the treasure-house."

There was no need for him to bid the Spaniard to follow, for the anxiety of the traitor who had so nearly slain Roger with his treacherous dagger impelled him forward till he outstripped the priest. Then he took him again by the robe and pulled him on, dragged him through the garden, and on to where one of the many sacrificial towers lifted its lofty walls above the buildings. It was surrounded by a low wall of glazed tiles, and its pavements and steps were constructed in a manner which showed that it was of special design.

"The king's tower," said the priest, by way of explanation. "He worships here alone. See the smoke of the fire which burns on the altar. Let the Spaniard mount. I will follow as swiftly as I can. I am weak with fasting."

He stood aside to allow Alvarez to pass him, and then, helped by his guard, slowly ascended the steps

Alvarez probes the Secret

which encircled the building. And after them came Roger, his tall, gaunt frame pressed against the wall to keep out of sight, and his sword in his hand. He was breathing hard. Every stair seemed as if it would be too much for him, for he had fought hard. He had never during the long days of the siege saved himself in the slightest, and had borne the same privations as had the common people. The exertion and the excitement were almost too much for him. But he thought of the reward, of the knights who had helped to send him to this Terra Firma, and of his comrades. If he escaped to the coast and gained a ship, how miserable to reach home empty handed, to arrive at the port of London with a tale of this siege, and with the report of lost riches. Would they be believed? Would the folks in London city credit the fact that the simple crossbow youth had risen to such high places, and had had the promise of huge wealth? No! They would be thought to be mad. Solid facts would be necessary to convince them. Gold and jewels and pearls. Roger determined to make one last struggle, and bracing himself for it, slowly followed up the stairs. He reached the very top and halted, his body concealed by an ornamental ledge which fringed the edge of the tower. Then he sought for some object behind which he could obtain cover, and from which he could observe what was passing. There was a huge stone vase for flowers near at hand, only the flowers had long since dwindled away, no one having had time or the strength to attend to their watering during the siege. But it would form an excellent obstruction, and our hero crept behind it. Then he slowly lifted his head, and looked on to the

Roger the Bold

square court at the top of the tower. There stood the scarlet-robed priest, obviously delaying so that the white cacique might have time to follow, while Alvarez stood beside him eager, excited, scarcely able to keep still, so much was he roused. But Roger noticed that he had lost the old hunted appearance. He no longer stared about him, looking now over this shoulder and now over that. Once, indeed, he walked to the ledge and stared over into the garden, but a glance satisfied him that none of the Spaniards followed. He returned, therefore, rubbing his hands together with pleasure, and muttering to himself.

"At last!" he was saying. "I have waited, and I have plotted, and not in vain. Here is reward for all the dangers I have run, for the risk I took when I lay off Cuba for the British ship. At last I shall see a fortune, and I alone of all who are here shall return to Spain with wealth. What is conquest without it? Even Fernando Cortes will envy me. But—supposing that English giant knew? He promised to slay me for the blow I dealt him. That I know, for it was told me. Ah, perhaps he is dead. I will ask the priest. Come, sir priest," he said aloud, addressing the man in scarlet, "tell me of this giant who led you. Is he dead?"

"Not dead," was the answer, "but starving—worn out with the struggle. Do not trouble about him now, but come. I have the key to the treasure. The picture directs me to the summit of this temple. There is a wall before me. I step to it like this, and stand with my toes against it, with the tips of the fingers of my right hand just level with the corner. Then I sweep them so above my head till I come to

Alvarez probes the Secret

a ledge. Here it is, my lord. And on the ledge—" (he fumbled there till his fingers came in contact with an object, and he withdrew a heavy bar of glittering metal, somewhat tarnished by exposure to the weather)—"on the ledge a bar of gold. I turn to the left, and step to the nearest door. It is here. I enter, and within search for a hole which will accept this bar. The picture shows it before me as I enter. Stand aside there, dogs who have helped to ruin this fair country. You keep the light from the chamber. Now enter, my lord, and the natives can follow if you wish it. Ah, here is the aperture. I place the bar within it and press. It gives. Enter again to this inner chamber, where you will find the treasure."

The priest stood back, lifting his arms as he did so, and pointing to a narrow aperture which had suddenly opened in what would appear to have been solid masonry. But a closer inspection showed that it was merely imitation—that the wall was painted to represent stonework, and that a portion, exquisitely made, was designed to swing outwards. Through the opening thus disclosed could be seen a chamber of small proportions, lit by rays which came from small niches in the outside walls. A closer inspection showed that it swept to the left out of sight, while, more engaging sight still to Alvarez, there were piles of loose stones within, and beyond those a heap of golden ornaments set with stones, and of crude gold struck into rough bars. It was a sight, in fact, to make the blood of the Spaniard course swiftly through his veins.

"The treasure!" he gasped. "The treasure for which I have longed! Bar the door, dogs! Hold

Roger the Bold

the priest, and let none enter while I am within. Remember! Let no one follow. If a question is asked, say that no Spaniard is here. Wait, and I will return in a few minutes."

He stepped to the opening and clambered through. Then the native guards closed about the doorway, so cutting off escape for the priest. But they kept no watch on the terrace outside. They failed to see the creeping giant who had emerged from behind the vase, while Roger himself, intent on treasure also and on the payment of his debt, kept no watch on the stairs by which he had ascended. He did not see the crafty figure which had tracked him to the terrace, the figure of a Spaniard to whom some inkling of the plot had come from Alvarez when in his cups, the figure of a Spaniard determined to share the treasure at the very least, and, if possible, if his hand could strike the blow, to take all for himself.

CHAPTER XX

A Race for the Ocean

ALVAREZ DE LOGAS was spellbound. The highest flight of his imagination had never conjured up such a scene, such vast wealth as was displayed in the treasure chamber. He stood aghast, more perturbed by the sight of so much gold and so many jewels, than he had been at the thought of losing even a portion of the riches to be gained by coming to Mexico. He stood rooted to the spot, now inclined to fling himself upon the gems which sparkled in the light which came through the apertures in the walls, and a moment later scarcely resisting the inclination to rush upon the massive golden vessels with the shining orbs set into their sides. His hand went to his head, and he lifted his steel cap, while the fingers of his other hand passed through the wisp of hair which clung to his scalp.

“The treasure! At last the treasure!” he gasped. “Riches enough to make me the highest noble in all Spain, wealthier even than the king. Here is comfort for my old age, and honour, honour such as comes not even to men like Fernando Cortes, for wealth brings everything in its train. I will take the gems alone, for those I can carry. But no!

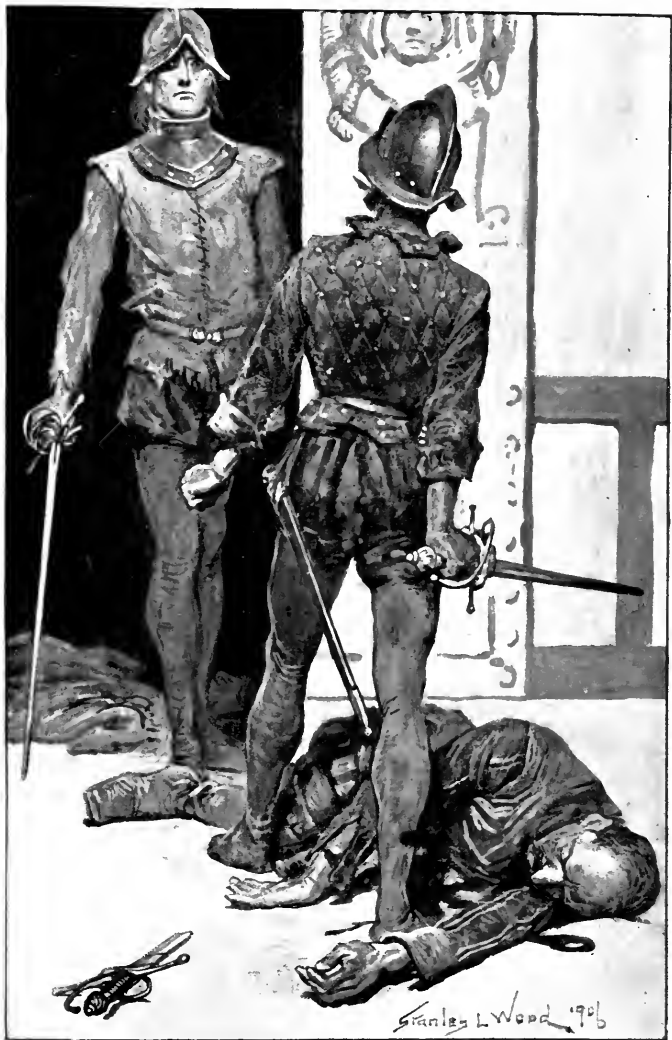
Roger the Bold

I cannot leave the gold. To do so would be a sin. I have bearers in plenty. All shall be mine!"

The sound of his voice startled him, for in his excitement he raised his tones almost to a shriek. But now he was frightened. The old fears returned to him, and he stared back at the door, and then ran to it, peering through the narrow opening into the chamber beyond, where the guards stood, listening to the shrieks of the unfortunate Mexicans below, and to the triumphal shouts of the native allies as they slaughtered the unhappy people. They showed on their faces that they longed to be gone, while the scarlet-cloaked priest also looked steadily to the door, as if he were also listening and expecting something. A suspicion crossed the mind of Alvarez. He looked sharply at his captive, who had read the secret of the disc for him. Then his eye went back to the treasure, and that conquered. The sight of the glittering gems and of the piled-up gold drove all fear and suspicion from his mind. He recollected nothing beside the fact that he was actually in the treasure-house, wading in the riches for which he had sought so long, for which he had plotted and schemed, and for which he had not hesitated to risk his own life and to attempt to take that of another. Every night he had dreamed of this great day, and now——"

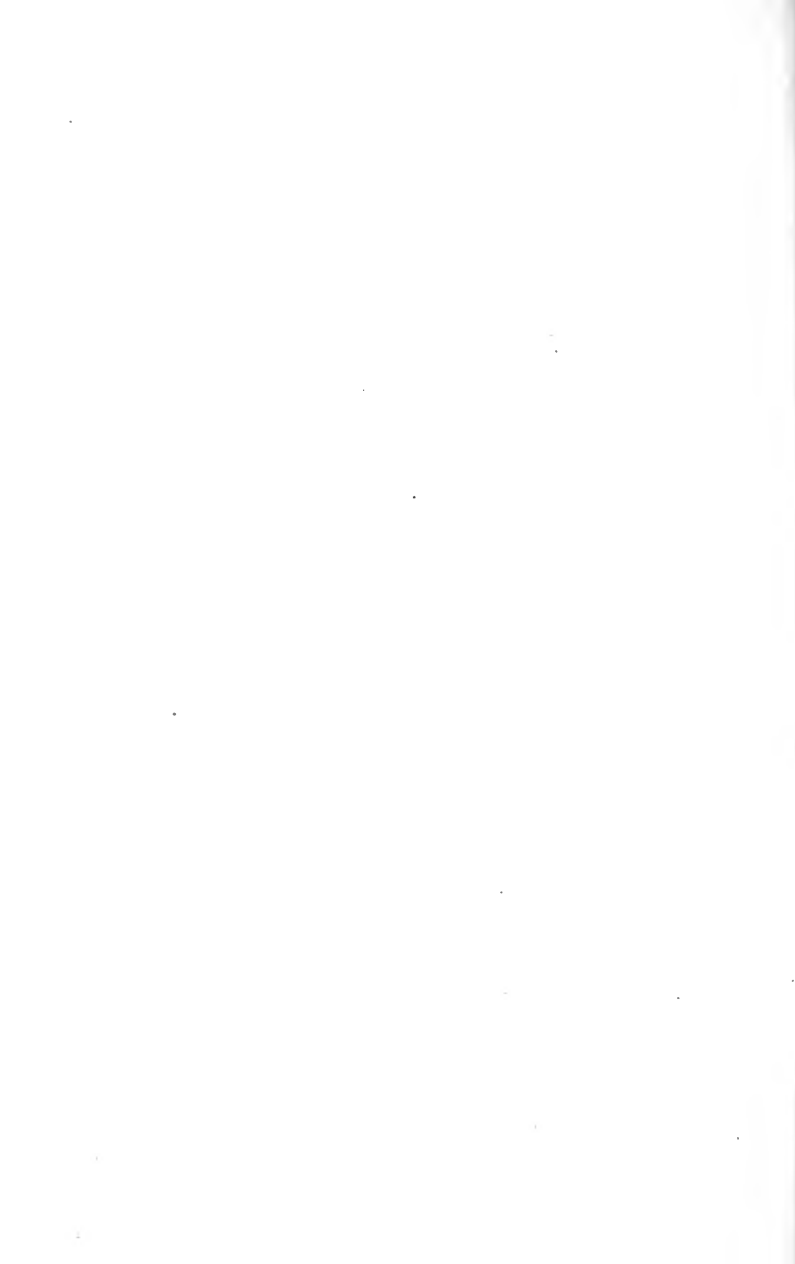
"Mine!" he shouted. "All mine! I will look round. I will touch the wealth, and then I will devise how to take it away."

He fell on his knees beside the gems, and let them trickle through his fingers. He picked out the largest and the finest stones, held them to the light, and set them aside. Then he poured



B506

"THE SPANIARD WAS STAGGERED"



A Race for the Ocean

handful after handful within his cotton-padded jerkin.

"A fortune within my shirt!" he chuckled. "A fortune with which to buy position and power, even should the other treasure fail to come to hand. And now for the other riches."

He crawled on hands and knees round the chamber, oblivious of all that was passing outside, unmindful of the awful slaughter then taking place, and deaf to the shouts of the combatants and to the thunder of the guns. "Gold! Gold and gems! Riches! Power! Honour in his native land. Pride of family, where he had had none!" These words alone rang in his ears. He was intoxicated with success, and if he had reared golden castles in the air on former occasions since he had stolen the famous disc, they were studded with brilliants this time. They towered to the very heavens, and on every battlement and arch glittering flags blew out with those same words embroidered upon them. "Riches! Power beyond all the dreams of a rapacious avarice! Plenty for the future! No toil! But power! A position of command in place of the humble post he had filled in former days! Wealth sufficient to make him the friend and intimate of nobles and king!"

What wonder if this Spanish soldier went crazy at the astounding wealth set out at his feet! What wonder that he forgot the siege of Mexico, forgot in this supreme moment all his caution, the scheming and the cunning which he had been so careful to practise. All through he had thrown dust in the eyes of his comrades, just as he had deceived the English aboard the brigantine. Not once in his

Roger the Bold

waking conscious moments had he let fall a syllable of his great secret. He had waited, silent and watchful, for the end of the siege, and only once had his caution been relaxed. He had been tried, and the native pulque pleased his palate. He had drunk deeply, and, roused by the potent drink, had whispered something which had aroused a suspicion, for it is only dead men who tell no tales. Alvarez in his cups was a live man, robbed of caution for the moment, and that moment was destined to be his ruin; for, outside, creeping up the stairway of the tower, came a Spaniard, that one who had overheard his drunken words. He followed his comrade, having gained news of his whereabouts. But he knew nothing of Roger, though, in a little while, when he rounded the next curve, and ascended a few more steps, the figure of the crouching giant would come into view.

Tap! Something fell on the tiled pavement on the summit of the tower, and Roger raised his head and started at the sound. His head shot up above the vase, and he peeped out.

"A crossbow bolt here!" he said to himself in astonishment. "And it is of our own manufacture. I can tell that by the bright colour of the feathers."

The sight caused him to think, and, for the moment, led his thoughts away from the task he had in hand. He pondered, but famine had dulled his wits. He was too weak to look further into a matter which could not be of importance, and he was therefore in the act of crouching again when a second bolt fell at his feet.

"A second! Then it must be a signal. Who can have fired it?"

A Race for the Ocean

He was at once alert, conscious that danger threatened from some unknown quarter, and he promptly crept to the edge of the tower and looked over. There was a figure crouching in the garden bushes below, a figure which waved frantically to him. Then it started from its lair and staggered to the steps, gesticulating, pointing to the side of the tower.

"Tamba!" exclaimed Roger. "The faithful fellow has shadowed me through the siege, and has followed here, and he sees something wrong. Some one may be following."

Quick as thought he ran across the square summit of the tower and hid behind the altar, upon which, no doubt, many an unhappy wretch had been sacrificed. But Roger had no time to think of that. His eyes were on the top of the stairs, and they opened even wider with amazement as a second Spaniard appeared, creeping stealthily, and peering ahead as if he feared detection. This man was in his stockinged feet, and when he saw that the summit was untenanted, he rose to the upright position and raced across to the door through which Alvarez and the priest had gone. He tore the curtain aside and looked in. Then he gave vent to a shout.

"Found! By our Lady, found!" he cried at the top of his voice. "The silent, secret Alvarez is discovered by his friend, and will divide. I see gold and jewels. Gold and stones enough for a score, and sufficient for you and me. I am silent if you consent to a division, if not——"

The triumphant smile which his features had worn vanished, and he drew his sword. Then he

Roger the Bold

peered in at the wealth, and a crafty, covetous grin caused the corners of his mouth to twitch.

"Why divide?" he said in low tones. "Why give half to a craven such as he, when there is all for the man who can take it? I can beat him. I can play him with my sword, and in these times tales do not pass."

He stood there a moment longer looking in at Alvarez, while the latter stared at his one-time friend as if he were a ghost. Not yet had he been able to tear his mind and thoughts away from the wealth in which he stood; but the glint of the sword told him of danger, and that brought him to his senses.

"Begone!" he growled. "This is mine! I found it. I slaved for the disc, and risked my life, and I will not divide."

Then the voice of caution whispered to him, and he spoke again—

"Begone at once," he said huskily, "and for your silence I will give sufficient to make you a man of wealth."

"Divide!" cried the intruder, advancing into the room.

"Never! It is mine. I will hold it with my sword."

Alvarez was now fully alive to his danger, and saw the threatening attitude of the Spaniard. He drew his weapon briskly, and clambered through the opening, his eyes fixed on the intruder. There was an ugly scowl on his wizened face, while his teeth were set firmly. He had a stake to fight for, as well as his life, and, as he clambered from the treasure chamber, he was determined to win or die.

A Race for the Ocean

"Retire," he said sternly. "I will carry out my compact. Go at once, and keep silent if you desire to be rich."

"I shall stay," was the answer. "You have found the gold. I shall take it from you. Put up your sword and fight for its possession. If that is not to your liking retire now and keep your tongue still, or I shall have something to say. But I promise to give you enough to buy wealth in Spain—wealth and a proud position."

There were no words after that. The full bitterness of his position came to Alvarez with a shock, and if he had been nearly crazy a few minutes before at the thought of the hoard which he had captured, he went entirely mad now as the dreadful truth was forced upon his mind. He was about to be robbed. Death were better than that. He raised his sword and rushed on his enemy. Sparks flew from the steel, and Roger, who had now crept to the door, heard the crash as the blades met. Then the intruder was forced to give way. He retreated before the blind fury of Alvarez, defending himself with difficulty. And soon they passed through the door, tearing the curtain from its fastenings, and continued the contest in the open air.

"Die!" shouted Alvarez, striking a frenzied blow. "Die, you rogue, who thought to rob me!"

He took two hands to his sword and swung it over his head. Then he brought the blade down with a crash which would have killed his opponent had he not raised his own weapon to ward off the cut. The blades met with a resounding crash, and then the Spanish steel gave way. Half Alvarez's sword tinkled on to the pavement.

Roger the Bold

The wealth is mine! The reward comes to me!" shouted his opponent.

He sprang at his enemy with a bound which carried him to close quarters. And then, while the unfortunate Alvarez still stood looking at his fractured blade, he drove his own weapon through his body.

"Die yourself!" shouted the Spaniard. "Die, and so keep a silent tongue for ever! I will take care of the treasure."

He looked at his victim, who lay dead already, and then swung round to go into the treasure chamber. But the figure of the English giant stood there, gaunt and unnaturally slim, hollow-cheeked and deadly pale, but cool, calm, and collected, and wearing a smile as he handled his stout English sword.

"The treasure is mine," said Roger, softly. "I held the disc for those who sent me here, and this man stole it from me. It comes back to me, and with it the treasure. Dispute my word if you dare."

The Spaniard was staggered. Just as Alvarez had stood rooted to the spot at the sudden sight of the treasure, he remained staring at Roger, hardly able to believe his eyes. Then he gave vent to a snarl of rage, and gripped his sword.

"You starved dog!" he said. "Dispute the word of a man who is already more than half in his grave!"

He lifted his weapon over his shoulder, took in a deep breath, and made ready to attack. But there were others watching, and before he could stir a step there was a twang of a bow, and a shaft struck

A Race for the Ocean

him full in the chest. In an instant he was down on the tiles, struggling feebly, and when Roger went to him and knelt at his side he found him just dead, for Tamba's missile had done its work.

"He is dead," said Roger, as he rose to his feet, "and Alvarez has received his just reward. There is nothing to keep me now from the treasure if the priest has shown it. Stay outside, Tamba; and cut down any of the natives who attempt to escape."

"None will do that," said the voice of the priest, as he emerged from the chamber. "These men here, who are my enemies, dare not to touch you, who are their god of air. You and the native are safe, and you have time to pick and choose. Enter and select the gems; then let us go."

Roger understood him sufficiently well, for he had had some weeks' intercourse with the Mexicans now, and had picked up their tongue. He needed no second invitation, but plunged into the chamber, and from there into the treasure-house. As in the case of Alvarez, his eyes gaped with astonishment. But Roger had not set wealth before everything; and, moreover, while coveting this treasure and hoping for the promised reward, he had done so with the pure desire to do his duty by those at home who had borne the expense of the expedition. When they were satisfied he would take his share, and not before. But here was such an abundance.

"Even King Hal has no wealth to compare with this," he cried. "There is abundance for all here. Stones and gold, and the latter is heavy. I shall leave it and take the stones."

"The curtain would make a sack, master, and there are the shirts of the Spaniards," suddenly

Roger the Bold

exclaimed Tamba, who had joined him. "Then there are the linen jerkins of the natives."

"And the red robe of the priest," added Roger, Quick! Let us call them all in and get away."

He went to the narrow opening and beckoned to the priest, giving him the necessary instructions, Then he set to work to select the finest gems, choosing those which were largest, for he had no knowledge of the correct colours.

"Here alone stands a fortune," he cried, as his eye lit upon the gems set aside by the avaricious Alvarez. "All picked for me by the very man who attempted to rob us of this spoil. Gather them together, Tamba, and tie them in a corner of the curtain. I will select some of the gold vessels, for they will convince those at home of the truth of our tale. That is, should we have the fortune to return. Now, the curtain and the shirts. Quick, for there is little time to waste."

"They are here, my lord. I will enter and help to hand them out. But hark!"

"The horn!" Roger shouted, as the plaintive note which, on a former day, had roused the Mexicans to fight for their king, came to his ear. "The signal for all who are left to retreat to the landing-stage."

"And for us to go also, my lord. Quick! Gather the jewels and let us go, otherwise we shall be killed, and then what service will this trash do you?"

They worked as if every second were of the utmost value, as indeed it was. The curtain was spread on the ground, and handfuls of gems tossed in, while Tamba had already tied some of the largest

A Race for the Ocean

into a corner. Then Roger threw a few of the finest gold cups and bowls into the heap, while the priest added the disc.

"Let the picture which holds the secret go too," he said bitterly. "Who knows? In years to come it may be the only sample of our writing which remains. It may outlive this fallen nation."

"Pick up the curtain," cried Roger, and in a moment Tamba had it on his back, and was climbing through the opening. Then came the priest with the shirt of the unfortunate Alvarez, while Roger followed with his own jerkin well laden. They had as much now as they could well carry, and the addition of another load, which was fetched by one of the natives, completed their burden.

"To the stage," said Roger, shortly. "And, priest, can we trust these men?"

"They will die rather than break their promise to me, or harm you," was the answer. "You have the Spaniards alone to fear. Forward, and let us get out of this awful city. The ruins strike grief into my mind. I would that I had been killed at the commencement rather than live to see this fair place levelled in ruins. Forward to the stage."

They staggered down the stairs, out through the garden, and then by a little-known corridor through the palace. Then they had to traverse a few streets before reaching the landing-stage. Thousands of natives were about, but these took no notice of the party, seeing their comrades with it. Soon the stage was in sight, and Roger gave vent to a cry of dismay.

"The Spaniards are there already," he said with a groan. "They will cut us off. Look, they

Roger the Bold

are bearing down with their swords and their pikes."

"Roger! Roger de Luce!"

A tall man, dressed in the native costume, but obviously one of the Englishmen, stood on the very edge of the stage shouting for our hero. Beside him lay one of the double canoes with a crew of rowers, while farther off in the water street others lay on their oars, containing the king and other nobles. But none would leave till the white cacique had come. Philip stood there, port-fire in hand, shouting his name, while he eyed the two cannon which had been captured early in the siege. Little ammunition remained, and that had been carefully husbanded for the very last occasion. Philip had trained the guns on that part by which the Spaniards would approach, and he stood there, watching them as they ran, prepared to fire at them, and so give his friend a few seconds more in which to reach the boats.

"He is killed!" he shouted in despairing tones. "He must be dead, or he would have come before. But I will not stir yet. Blow the horn again. Sound another note, and let us see if that will not bring him."

"He is here already. See! He and his party come, and they have the treasure."

It was Teotlili who caught him by the sleeve and drew his attention to the approaching party. Then together they shouted to Roger and his bearers to hasten. A minute later all but Philip were safely aboard the canoe.

"The king?" gasped Roger, touching Teotlili's arm.

A Race for the Ocean

"He is there. All who are alive are aboard," was the answer. "Listen to the last shot of the siege."

He pointed to Philip, and Roger raised his head, watching his friend as he trained the weapons on the advancing Spaniards. He glanced along the sights, blew at his port-fire, and then waited till a musket bullet sped past his cheek. Then he touched the vents and leaped into the canoe.

"Row!" shouted Teotlili." Row out into the lake!"

They pushed off as the cannon exploded, scattering a murderous charge of stones amongst the Spaniards. Then the crew thrust their paddles into the water and sent the craft along. Worn out though they were, and more than half starved, they managed to summon sufficient strength for the task, and very soon were out on the great lake. It was getting dusk, and thanks to that, this canoe managed to reach the far shore without attracting the attention of the enemy. And there they learned that the king and a few of his nobles had been captured, while fourteen of the Englishmen were gathered there in addition to Roger. Some thousands of the Mexicans had also reached the shore, and stood there disconsolate.

"Scatter at once," called out Teotlili. "Make for the hills, and wait there for news of the king. Do not stay here longer, for in the morning the enemy will cover the plain. Now, my lord," he said, turning to Roger. "What are your commands? You have served us faithfully, you and your friends. The reward you have with you is far too mean, and too small to repay you; for such as

Roger the Bold

it is it is yours by right. Where will you take it? There is no longer need for your arms in this unhappy country."

"Then lead us to the coast," answered our hero. "Take us to Vera Cruz, where we may be able to capture a vessel."

Without loss of time the noble gave the necessary orders, picking out a number of men who had acted as the king's bodyguard, and who were in fairly good condition. Then he placed a guide at the head, and bade the whole lot advance. Two days later they came in sight of the Spanish town of Vera Cruz, which had risen like a mushroom, as if in one night, the labour being undertaken by the natives. There were ships in the roadstead, and a spy reported that but few white men remained there to guard the place, the remainder having gone to Mexico.

What need to tell more! Roger and his friends, though almost worn out, made one last effort and captured the very brigantine in which they had sailed from England. They embarked with their treasure, and two days later put in at a creek some hundred miles down the coast, where, with the help of friendly natives, they revictualled the ship as well as possible, placing aboard sufficient fruits and herbs to last them for some weeks. Then came the hour of parting. Tamba stood beside his master, while Teotlili stepped into the canoe alongside.

He dared not look back once he had taken his farewell, and there were tears in Roger's eyes at the parting.

Five weeks later the brigantine put in at the port of London, her crew looking more like

A Race for the Ocean

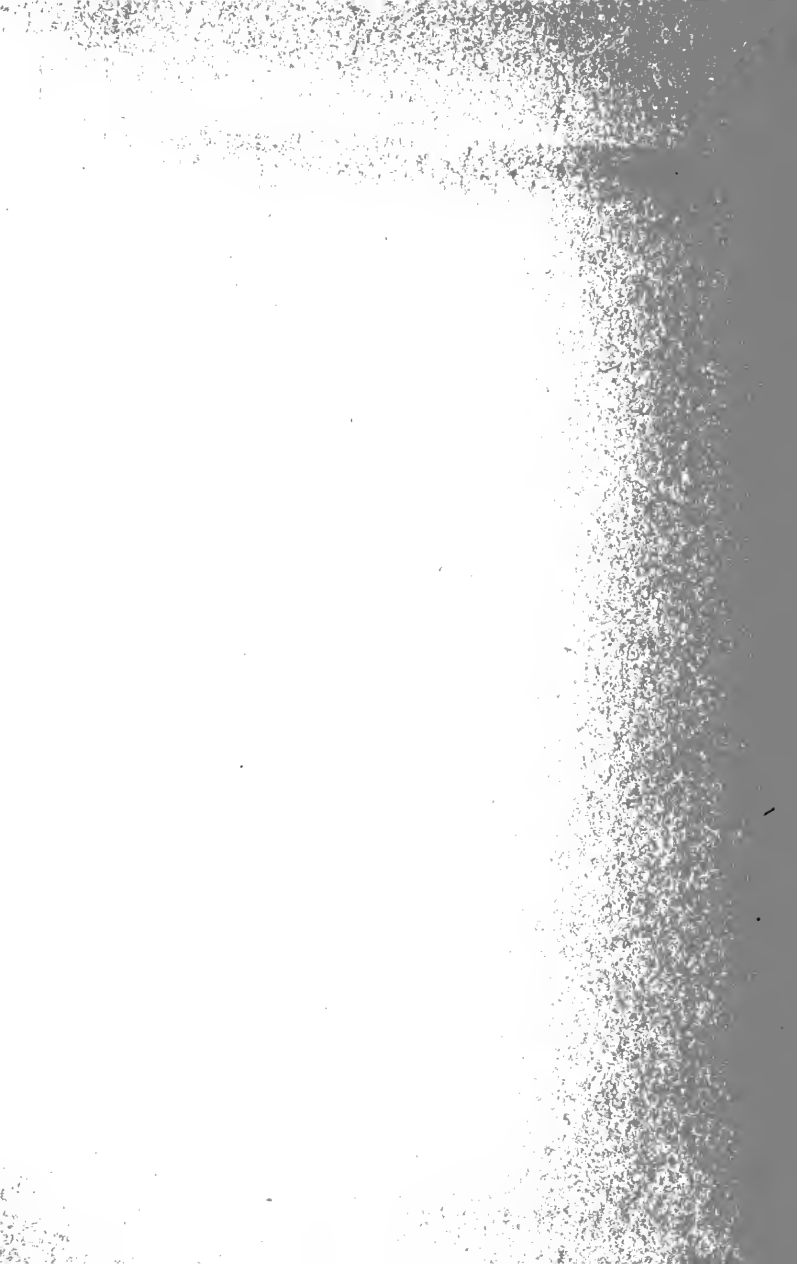
scarecrows than like British sailors. But they had improved in condition during the voyage, thanks to two calls made during their run along the northern coast of South America. But clothes they had none to speak of, and so it was a day before they could venture from the vessel. Then Roger, the acknowledged leader, with Philip beside him, and Peter Tamworth bringing up the rear, and watching over Tamba and the load he carried, made their way to the palace of King Henry.

The whole of England rang with the tale of their exploit, and Roger and his comrades met with due honour. But little was said of the jewels and the wealth, for it would have been unwise to rouse the ire of Spain. Still, Roger had done good work for those who had organized the expedition, and they did not forget. Our hero won fame and a knighthood and sufficient wealth to permit of his buying a fine estate in the country and a house in the city of London. And there Tamba went with him; while Philip and Peter, now both men of means and consequence, came often to speak of the old days, of the Spaniards, and of the one-time fairy city of Mexico. Then they would fill their leathern jugs, to which they still clung for the sake of old acquaintance, and would drink in silence to those who were gone, to the gallant souls who had fought beside them, and to those fine natives of Mexico who had struggled under the leadership of Roger the Bold.

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